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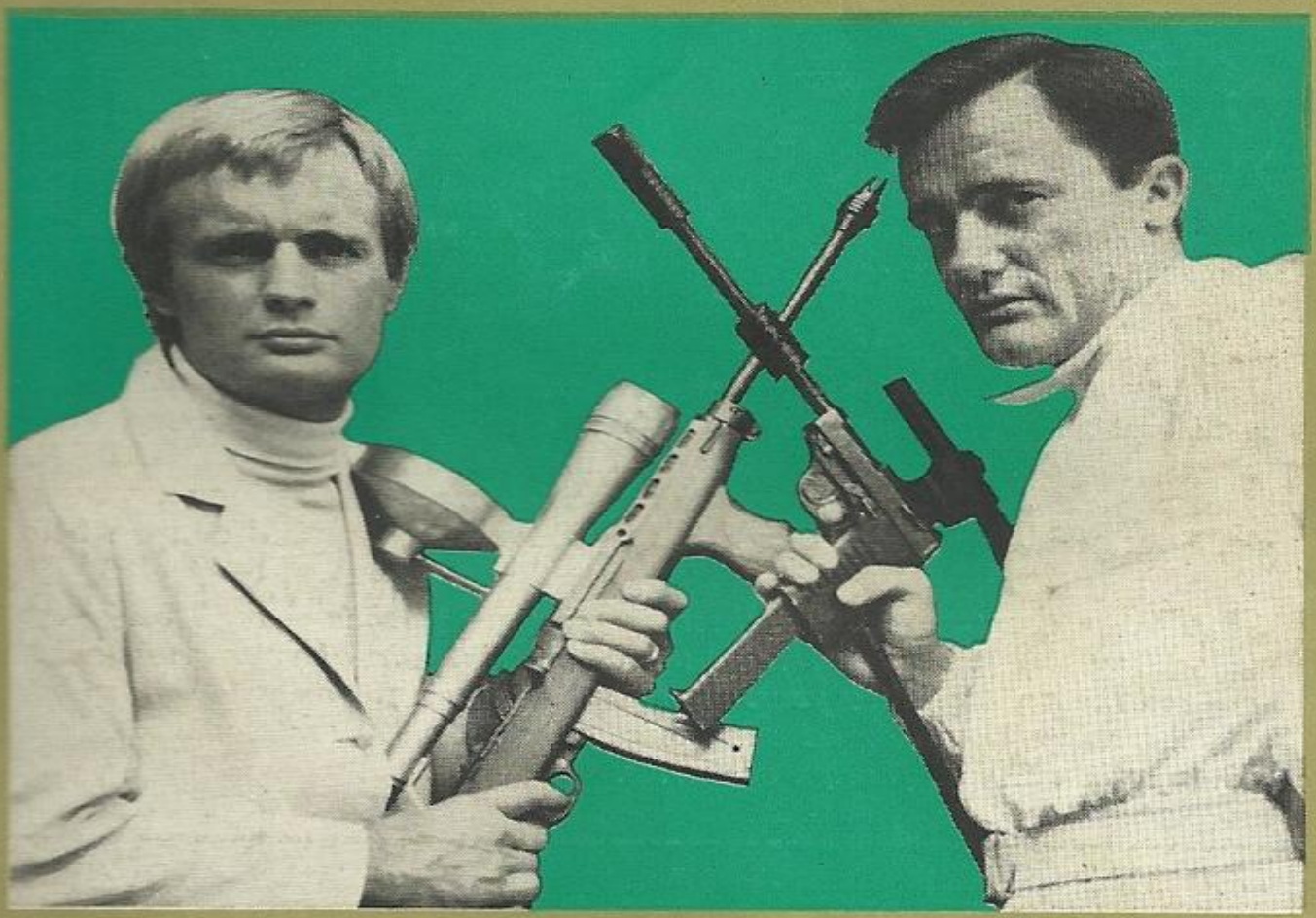

THE UGLY MAN AFFAIR

A New NAPOLEON SOLO and ILLYA KURYAKIN Complete Novel by

ROBERT HART DAVIS

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PART I

THE UGLY MAN AFFAIR

By Robert Hart Davis

Some called it treachery. Some called it madness. But all agreed on one thing–it ended in a death beyond belief! While the entire Far East reeled on the brink of war, Solo and Illya sought the ugly madman who stole the blood of humans–and changed them into insensate living dead men!

PROLOGUE

THE CORPSE WITH TIRED BLOOD

The fog rolled and billowed. Somewhere the bells in the church tower rang half after midnight.

The tallow bonnet lamps of the specially converted taxi penetrated the murk for barely a dozen feet ahead. The driver, an operative on loan from the London station of the United Command for Law and Enforcement, had rolled the window down an inch on his side.

Fog came drifting through the crack. It carried the smells of dampness, fish, rotting garbage. A squeal of laughter split the night. Two girls in mini-skirts appeared in the headlight beams. The driver hit his brakes. The taxi ground to a halt a foot away from them.

Laughing and pointing, the girls in their Carnaby Street apparel went on, arm in arm.

The driver tugged the bill of his greasy cap and let out a sigh. “Near thing. Sorry if I shook yer up, guvs.”

In the gloom of the rear seat, Napoleon Solo put a finger to his lips and scowled. Sitting forward in a posture of tension beside him, Illya Kuryakin framed words silently: *“Anything wrong?”*

Solo squinted his eyes, shrugged to indicate his uncertainty. He held a small plastic wafer with an earplug insert to his right ear. A double strand of wire ran from the wafer across the back of the front seat to a jack in the dashboard.

Except for a conventional instrument cluster crowded in at the left of the dash, all of the other dials, gauges and softly glowing lights on the board were unmarked and obviously had nothing to do with the taxi’s operation.

“The signal’s weak,” Solo said at last. “Can you get any more volume, Parkleigh?”

The U.N.C.L.E. operative masquerading as a taxi driver, Cockney accent and all, fiddled with a switch. “That’s as high as she’ll go, guv. Is the signal still goin’ away from yer?”

Solo shook his head. An uneasy tension began to build inside of him. He and Illya Kuryakin had been watching Doctor Ffolkes-Pryce for nearly a week. The doctor had made no suspicious moves, no contacts with persons who conceivably could be associated with the supra-nation, THRUSH.

Then, tonight, as the two agents sat eight rows behind Ffolkes-Pryce at Convent Garden, the break came.

An usherette summoned the doctor from his seat just before intermission. Illya followed Ffolkes-Pryce to the lobby and observed him enter a telephone cubicle.

The doctor emerged a few minutes later looking pale, nervous, and in a hurry. He left the theatre at once. Solo and Kuryakin were right behind him.

Parkleigh's special car was parked in front. As Solo jumped in, Illya pretended to feel ill. He staggered against the rear fender of the cab which Ffolkes-Pryce occupied. In a second he planted the homing signal on the bumper.

Ffolkes-Pryce's cab shot away into the lowering fog. Solo kept Parkleigh at the curb for five minutes, the earpiece already hooked up and the signal tracking loud and clear. That way, Ffolkes-Pryce wouldn't have his suspicions roused by the sight of a strange vehicle following.

Now, however, the signal no longer seemed to be receding. It went *beepa-beepa-beepa* on a sustained level that was lower than before.

Suddenly Solo understood. He unplugged the ear instrument. "I think we've got him. The signal is softer because he's no longer in the taxi. He's gone indoors."

Illya indicated the turgidly rolling grayness outside their car. "He could be anywhere within six blocks. Does anyone have a bloodhound handy?"

The driver chuckled. "Next bes' thing, guv. You blokes who hang out in America may think you got the corner on the scientific stuff, but our lads in the lab here don't do so bad. 'Arf a mo."

Parkleigh's thin hands touched a stud on the dash. A panel chunked aside, revealing a small square screen of frosted glass. Parkleigh touched a switch. The screen lit up pearl white, with a grid of red lines overlaid.

At the touch of another switch, an amplifier brought the *beepa-beepa* signal through a speaker alongside the display glass. A tiny brilliantly white blip appeared on the screen inside one of the gridded squares.

"There he is, guv. Somewhere in the block just up ahead. We can't miss him."

Solo's mouth tightened into a relieved smile. "Your boys aren't half bad at all. Thanks."

"All we have to do is search one complete block," said Illya, somewhat glumly.

Parkleigh looked miffed. "It's better'n searching eight or ten, ain't it?"

"Definitely." Solo levered open the right hand door, prepared to jump out.

"Listen, I don't want to violate security," Parkleigh said, but I been driving you blokes around for a week and struggling with this silly-ass accent in the bargain."

Parkleigh's speech had now become the clipped, elegant diction of Oxford and the nobility, "Mind telling me what all the wind's up about? Who is the chap you fellows are after?"

Illya explained, "A Doctor Ffolkes-Pryce. An authority on research and development of small nuclear powered hand weapons. Highly theoretical stuff, but potentially very valuable."

"Is that a fact?" said Parkleigh. "Who does this chap work for? The War Office?"

"U.N.C.L.E.," Solo explained. "And you wouldn't have heard of him because his work's so highly secret. The Beirut station picked up a tip the first of the month that Ffolkes-Pryce was going to defect to our friends at THRUSH.

"Illya and I were sent over here to pick him up, follow him, see whether it happened and more important, how it *could* happen. Ffolkes-Pryce's loyalty was never in question before. He has the highest security clearance you can get in U.N.C.L.E. But now it looks like it is happening, so we'd better move."

TWO

The fog pressed clammy and unpleasant against Solo's cheeks as they walked along. They passed the entrance to a mews. From its darkness they heard sounds which distinctly resembled one man throttling another. A drunken costermonger reeled at them from the left, whining for a handout. Illya thrust him away. The man promptly collapsed in the gutter, snoring.

As they reached the cross street, a lorry passed at high speed. Solo had the uncomfortable feeling that they were traveling through a nether world. Little or nothing of their surroundings could be seen. The murky buildings barely put forth any light at all.

Moving to the right out of range of a feeble street lamp, Illya drew the sections of his long-muzzled U.N.C.L.E. pistol from inner pockets of his own dark raincoat. He snapped them together, checked the firing controls and slid the entire weapon back into the specially cut long outer pocket.

"That's the block over there, Napoleon. Can you make out how many buildings?"

"Looks like just one. A big one," Solo answered. "Let's get a little closer."

They crossed cautiously. A high, spike-topped iron fence ran off to the right and left. An immense, sagging Edwardian building loomed beyond it. Solo bent to peer at a small brass plate affixed to two of the black iron spikes alongside the iron gate. The plate read: *The Fordyce Undertaking Establishment, Ltd.*

Illya sniffed the fog. "Morticians. How cheerful."

A quick tour on foot told the two U.N.C.L.E. agents that the premises of Mr. Fordyce and his fellow death specialists occupied the entire block. The iron fence encircled the whole property. The place had a rear gate, for delivery vans and hearses no doubt, but it was closed with a heavy padlock and chain.

In minutes the two agents returned to the main gate. Solo rubbed the fingertips of his right hand together like a cracksman warming up.

"Stand by for alarm bells, poison gas and trap doors in the sidewalk," he said, and gave the lever handle of the gate a tug.

With a squeak of rusty hinges the gate opened. Solo looked startled. Illya laughed low.

“You don’t give us enough credit Napoleon. No one’s expecting us because we did such a splendidly anonymous job of shadowing Ffolkes-Pryce.

Solo wasn’t convinced. He closed his hand around the pistol muzzle in his pocket and eased through the gate. “Or maybe the booby traps are a little further inside.” Cautiously he moved up the shortwalk, climbed the ornate marble staircase which led to tall double doors.

A placard hung from one of the handles. Illya crowded up to read it: *Closed until further notice.*

Gently, Solo tested both the door handles. Each one gave a short way, then resisted. “Locked up tight.” He reached beneath his coat to pull out a small metallic-finish box. “But I’d rather not try this on the main door. Let’s see if there’s another.”

Illya Kuryakin indicated something to their left. “Looks like a walk way there. What are we going to do once we get inside? Make funeral arrangements for some fictitious nephew?”

“Just see what’s happening. If Ffolkes-Pryce is in this place, and in the claws of our bird friends after all, we’ll get him out as best we can. Well take him back to London HQ and see what we can do to wring some kind of answer from him as to why one of the top researchers in the organization decided to play games with the enemy.”

By now they had reached the corner of the building. They crept all the way around to the rear. There Solo applied the metallic box to a locked wooded door alongside the shadow-clotted delivery bay. He inserted small prongs on the box into the wood of the door right next to the lock. Then he twisted a dial on the box’s face.

A low, continuous clicking came from the box for around one minute. At the end of that time, Solo pried the box loose. He slipped it in his pocket and cautiously turned the doorknob.

The door swung inward. Ahead stretched a dim, low-ceilinged hallway. Paint peeled from its walls. A feeble light burned far down, near a staircase. The agents slipped inside. Illya shut the door without making a sound. The air smelled of formaldehyde.

Napoleon Solo led the way down the corridor, testing the floor with the tip of his shoe each time he took a step. Evidently Illya had been correct in

his judgment of a few minutes ago. If this were indeed a THRUSH nest, it was lightly guarded at its perimeters. Maybe Solo and Illya had done their tedious, time-consuming job of shadowing Ffolkes-Pryce to perfection. On the other hand, the apparent disregard of security measures by THRUSH could indicate some other condition entirely.

A slipshod operation, perhaps? Solo doubted it. THRUSH was never slipshod. Then confidence? Complete confidence that Doctor Ffolkes-Pryce belonged to them? The thought confounded and upset Solo.

Defection by a man of Ffolkes-Pryce's status was almost unthinkable. The specter of a gaping weakness in U.N.C.L.E.'s internal intelligence procedures loomed as a real shocker, a very dangerous one.

Had a THRUSH agent in Beirut not become involved with a woman on the outside, and taken the reprimand of his superiors in less than good humor, and then gone over to U.N.C.L.E. for revenge, taking with him all the little rumors and snippets of hearsay he possessed, U.N.C.L.E. would never had heard of Ffolkes-Pryce's impending defection in the first place.

At least Mr. Alexander Waverly had not given them any additional information when he issued the assignment. Solo could only assume something was drastically wrong with internal intelligence.

At Solo's side, Illya stiffened in mid-stride. Solo cocked his head. Sure enough, voices drifted down the dim staircase ahead. The agents moved closer. By kneeling, Solo managed to look up the stairs into a large room with a cracked, buff-colored ceiling. Vague lighting up there showed him musty old velveteen drapes hung to either side of the entrance at the head of the stairs. An uncertain voice, words indistinguishable, was saying something. Then someone else spoke in much stronger, forceful tones:

"–of course, Doctor, we are under no obligation to explain anything to you. You are here. You belong to us now. You will work for us in whatever capacity we say. And you had better understand that."

Again the mumbling voice. Then the second speaker laughed: "Yes, yes, naturally we'll take care of your–ah–condition." The laugh carried a malicious note in it. "But only as long as you remain loyal to THRUSH. You are quite important to us, you and quite a few others like you. Not long from now, you see, it is men just like you who shall tip the scales finally and for all time in our favor. Ah, I see by your expression that you understand. Splendid. The craving does get hold of one after a bit, doesn't it?"

Napoleon Solo bobbed his head again. Illya understood the signal instantly. Side by side, long-muzzle pistols drawn out, the men inched toward the bottom of the stairs for the charge upward.

Solo had no idea how many THRUSH agents might be in the room above. But he'd heard no other voices besides the two. He was willing to gamble. Down came Solo's foot on the lowest stair tread. Bells clanged.

With a curse, Solo launched his charge upward anyway. THRUSH booby traps this far inside the perimeter of one of their stations was unusual, but he kicked himself for not having learned the unexpected from the supra-nation.

Illya raced after him up the stairs. The heavy voice in the room above shouted: "Gregor! The emergency stairs! Timon, you and Markos stop whoever is coming up. This way, please, Doctor! Hurry!"

Sounds of a struggle blended with the heavy feet of men running toward the top of the stairs. The curtains hanging at the stair-top billowed aside on wired tracks. The curtains had hidden two banks of vertical metal cones, six cones to a bank, mounted on the wall on either side of the stairs.

Just as Solo reached the level of the lowest cone, all twelve cones discharged a thin. Grayish gas which struck his face, blinded his eyes and brought nausea to his throat.

A THRUSH agent in a business suit loomed at the head of the stairs. The man fired. Solo dodged. Illya flattened against the other wall, shielding his mouth with one hand as he shot back with the other.

The Thrushman pitched forward with blood streaking his shirt bosom. Coughing violently, Solo kicked the man on down the stairs.

From the room above came more sounds of struggle, the heavy voice exclaiming: "Doctor–a little faster!"

The second THRUSH agent appeared. Solo charged up past the last of the spewing cones and hit the agent a smashing body block with his shoulder. Solo and the Thrushman spilled backward into the room. It was a huge, poorly-lit parlor filled with overstuffed furniture and Tiffany-style lamps hanging on tarnished green chains from the ceiling.

As Solo rolled and thrashed across the Oriental carpet, avoiding the kicks and the gun hand of the man he'd tumbled, he glimpsed a fat, bald-headed man, another agent, and thin, goggle-eyed Ffolkes-Pryce struggling on the room's far side. Ffolkes-Pryce seemed dazed, confused, reluctant to follow the other two–

Solo had no more time to evaluate the situation. His THRUSH enemy twisted over on his belly and aimed his gun directly at Solo's head. Desperately Solo whipped his own gun hand up and over.

Too late. He knew he wouldn't make it in time–

A low, flat pop in back of Solo announced Illya's arrival. The Thrushman took the bullet in his ribs, yelling with pain. He struggled to one knee, eyes glazed. The knee collapsed under him. As he fell, the gun in his flailing hand exploded.

On the other side of the parlor, Doctor Ffolkes-Pryce screamed.

The fat man cursed fluently in a foreign tongue. He shoved Ffolkes-Pryce away and disappeared down a stairway which had opened in the floor near the baseboard of the parlor's outside wall. Dr. Ffolkes-Pryce was sprawled on the Oriental carpet. The fat Thrushman had evidently judged him to be fatally shot and decided to save his own neck. Solo and Illya charged in pursuit–

Only to drop to their knees, doubled with intestinal cramps and unmerciful pain. The delayed effects of the blast of gas from the stair cones left the two agents lying helpless for the better part of fifteen minutes.

Finally Solo felt a measure of control return to his twitching limbs. He fought down the sour taste in his throat, weaved to his feet. Ffolkes-Pryce lay on his back. The secret escape stair gaped.

Illya stumbled toward it, went down it. He returned in two minutes. His head appeared above floor level as he said: "It goes all the way to the basement. A tunnel leads to a false manhole in the street. They are gone, the two who were–"

Suddenly Illya stopped. He saw the expression of horror on Solo's face. He climbed the rest of the way into the room.

"The shot got him in the neck," Solo said, kneeling beside Ffolkes-Pryce. "He's dead but–Illya, look at what's coming out of the wound."

Face wrenching into a mask of disbelief, Illya stared. The bullet had torn a sizeable wound in Ffolkes-Pryce scrawny throat. But instead of deep red blood fountaining out, a thin fluid poured down the scientist's neck and soaked his collar. The fluid was almost transparent. It bore only the faintest of pink tinges.

"Napoleon–" Illya clutched his friend's shoulder. "That doesn't look like blood or run like blood, it–"

"But that's what he's bleeding," said Solo, pointing. "Whatever it is."

The pinkish-clear fluid poured from the wound in the dead man’s neck. Then Napoleon Solo noticed something else, and the nightmare began in earnest. Solo’s shaking index finger moved near the wound, to indicate a pair of tiny red puncture marks in the neck of Doctor Ffolkes-Pryce.

And the word that leaped into Solo’s dazed mind unbidden was– *vampire.*

PART I

UGLY IS MORE THAN SKIN DEEP

"Mr. Solo–Mr. Kuryakin," said Mr. Alexander Waverly, "I have a confession to make."

Illya's right eyebrow lifted. "Sir?"

Waverly gestured with the stem of the perpetually empty pipe.

"You heard correctly, Mr. Kuryakin. A confession. An admission, if you will, that I did not give you and Mr. Solo all of the background details concerning the Ffolkes-Pryce assignment."

Waverly's expression grew dour. "I did not do so because I did not have full clearance. Those of us in Policy and Operations agreed amongst ourselves that the threat which now faces this organization could be of such magnitude that we dared not make a move until we had translated our speculations into a reality. The speculations, as you will understand in a moment, posed a peril to U.N.C.L.E. of a kind only imagined in our wildest nightmares. With your return of the good doctor's corpse to our laboratories, you have indeed translated this speculation to a reality, and made it imperative that top agents be assigned to take counter measures at once."

Waverly drew in a long breath. "We may face the most massive, insidious and potentially devastating threat to U.N.C.L.E. in our entire history."

Napoleon Solo had been inclined to laugh a moment ago. Now the lines of Waverly's face, the intensity of Waverly's expression, convinced him he'd better not. But he did say:

"I can't imagine what could be that devastating, sir."

"Can't you, Mr. Solo? Consider this. Manipulation of U.N.C.L.E. personnel, including those with the highest of clearances such as Ffolkes-Pryce, so that they become willingly or unwillingly, the instruments of THRUSH. Consider a traitor within our own ranks, Mr. Solo, and how much potential damage that traitor could do. Then multiply a single traitor by ten, and ten again. That is the magnitude of the threat we may confront."

Stunned, Solo said, "Defection?"

“On an incredibly vast scale.” Waverly clicked his cold pipe against his teeth and sank into a chair. “Nothing more and nothing less. A dreadful prospect, eh?”

“Ffolkes-Pryce was one of the defectors?” Illya asked.

Mr. Waverly nodded. “And our internal intelligence has not broken down. Those of us at the top in Section I cooked up the story about the Beirut leak as a cover. We knew about Ffolkes-Pryce peculiar behavior. But if a good number of our people got wind of what we suspect, panic would spread. Brother against brother in our ranks, so to speak. We mustn’t have that. Hence the fiction about Beirut. However, it has now become imperative for us to place you two on this assignment.”

Waverly stared out from beneath his rather prodigious brows. “I needn’t lecture you gentlemen on the burden of secrecy which is now upon you.”

A grim silence then, filling the elaborately equipped room with an almost tangible tension. Against the window pane, forlorn raindrops ticked. The early evening shower blurred the lights in Manhattan’s skyscrapers.

Solo and Illya had flown the specially refrigerated corpse of Dr. Ffolkes-Pryce back to America aboard an U.N.C.L.E. prop-jet. They arrived late in the afternoon. Hungry and fatigued, they went directly to Waverly’s office to report. They were still there, without having eaten or rested. This too served to drive home to Solo the terrible seriousness of the situation which he did not as yet fully understand.

The man slumped in the chair, Alexander Waverly, served as the chief of Section I, Policy and Operations. His office was equipped with computers, built-in TV monitors and a large, circular motorized conference table which revolved at the touch of a button. Few outsiders had ever seen the room. Fewer still of the eight million plus people in New York were even aware that it existed.

This headquarters room was the strategic center of the entire U.N.C.L.E. complex, which was secreted behind the facades of a row of buildings a few blocks from the United Nations enclave in the city’s East Fifties. The buildings consisted of a large public parking garage, four dilapidated brownstones and a modern three-story whitestone.

The first two floors of the whitestone were occupied by an exclusive key-club restaurant, The Mask. On the third floor were sedate offices. These, a front, belonged to U.N.C.L.E. They interconnected with the maze

of steel corridors and suites which hid behind the decaying fronts of the brownstones.

There were four known entrances to the three-story U.N.C.L.E. complex, one of them being through the third-floor offices in the whitestone and another through a carefully contrived dressing room in Del Florio's Tailor Shop on the level just below the street.

Within U.N.C.L.E. headquarters proper no staircases could be found. Four elevators handled all vertical traffic. And inside the steel-walled rooms, where signal lights of red, amber, purple, green, royal blue blinked constantly in coded sequences, worked a crack cadre of alert young men and women of many races, creeds, colors and national origins.

The equipment installed for their use was the most sophisticated known. The complex devices for communication included high-powered shortwave antennas and elaborate receiving and sending gear hidden away behind a large neon advertising billboard on the roof. These resources, utilized by top agents like Solo and Illya, stood between the world and the collapse of a delicate balance of terror–and should the balance tip, the supra-nation of fanatics known by the code name THRUSH would soon step in to claim the spoils.

Finally Napoleon Solo spoke. "I hate to say it, sir, but I'm a little disappointed. After all, I should think Section I could trust us by now."

"Of course, of course, Mr. Solo. In all conventional affairs. But this latest THRUSH threat is so appallingly unconventional that Section I decided not to leak it even to our own, until we were sure.

Mr. Waverly stared at Solo intently, as though trying to convince him via the earnestness of expression. Waverly was a middle-aged, rather seedy man with a rather long, lined face. His hair was the neatest thing about him, combed down on one side from a precise part. He wore now, as always, exquisitely baggy Harris tweeds.

Speaking sometimes with deceptive slowness, Mr. Waverly seemed an anachronism in the sleek modernity of the office. But his outward appearance and manner hid a man incredibly tough and tough-minded.

Illya sat with a leg hooked over the arm of a conference chair. He looked bookish and introverted as usual. His blond hair fell nearly to his blue eyes, which had circles of tiredness beneath them. I response to Waverly, he said: "You are telling us, sir, that this Ffolkes-Pryce was not an isolated case?"

“I am saying precisely that. Before you go on this assignment, I want you to review the taped data thoroughly. So far only members of Section I have seen it. It contains the names, dates, complete summaries of dozens of similar incidents which have occurred within U.N.C.L.E. during the past few months. We have lost top Operations and Enforcement operatives. We have lost research people. We have lost clerk-typists. In short, up to now it has been a closely guarded secret that not only have many of our people taken to acting strangely and then disappeared–quite a few of them have actually proved to be double agents, right within our own ranks.”

Solo shook his head. His dark eyes were hooded, thoughtful. They reflected the glow of flashing computer lights along the wall. Solo was wearing dark gray slacks, a matching double-breasted blazer with silver buttons engraved with the Canadian maple leaf, and a pair of his $75 hand-lasted shoes from London.

Illya rose and began to pace. “Well, sir, perhaps we’d better have some specifics. How many have actually taken place?”

Mr. Waverly needed no statistical tables at hand. He had nearly total recall of everything he read:

“Twenty-two since last April. Eighteen were aborted, but the first four succeeded, so far as we know. The personnel involved in those four incidents–chaps like Whiteman, our top Section II fellow in Burma, and Dr. Arkojenian of the cryogenics lab–simply vanished. Then of course there have been others in less advanced stages. Once we got onto the pattern, we began to shift some of these critical people, remove key responsibilities from their hands in case they–ah–did go over. We have not succeeded in every case. Witness Ffolkes-Pryce.”

Solo walked to the window and stared out at the rain. “A minute ago, sir, you made reference to U.N.C.L.E. people acting strangely. Now you just referred to a *pattern.*” Solo swung around, somber faced, no trace of his usual good humor visible. “Just what do you mean?”

“Oh, ah,” said Mr. Waverly. “Excellent question. It has become apparent that those U.N.C.L.E. operatives who turn into security risks suffer from something which, at first anyway, resembles merely the effects of over-work. Extreme fatigue, bad dizzy spells, nervousness–”

“I feel that way often enough myself,” Illya commented with a wry look.

“Naturally, for brief periods, we all do,” said Waverly. “But those whom this THRUSH malady strikes–we call it a malady for want of a better term–are perpetually afflicted. The symptoms become worse day by day. Efficiency takes a sharp drop. Loyalty, determination, spirit–these suffer markedly and visibly.

“We really had no idea of what was happening at first, when the first defector disappeared in Nairobi and was later seen being very chummy with some known THRUSH operatives in East Berlin. Others afflicted with symptoms have apparently continued to work in our organization, and it now becomes clear that perhaps they have been assigned by THRUSH to do just that. Continue at their stations, as double agents.”

Solo snorted. “I can’t buy it, sir. How could THRUSH undermine U.N.C.L.E. that way? By spooning drugs into our food? Hypnotizing us while we sleep? Our security precautions are too tight for things like that to happen.”

“Agreed,” said Waverly. “Which is why Section I watched this state of affairs with such utter dismay. Then you gentlemen brought back the corpse of Doctor Ffolkes-Pryce.”

Solo understood. The hair on his neck prickled. But Illya spoke it first: “His blood.”

“Exactly,” said Waverly.

“Abnormal,” said Solo. “More like some kind of serum or foreign fluid.”

“Right again,” said Waverly. “The lab, incidentally, is having great difficulty breaking down the samples they took from Ffolkes-Pryce.”

Waverly pulled a sheaf of blue flimsies from a pigeonhole in the edge of the circular conference table.

“Glance through these if you wish. All they say is that the fluid found in Ffolkes-Pryce’s circulation system contains traces of three of the hydrobrionic alkaline class. Those compounds are suspended in the fluid base whose formula as yet defies isolation. But the hydrobrionics, I am informed, are most effective at robbing a person of will power and softening his mind.”

Napoleon Solo rubbed his palms on the arms of the chair. His skin felt clammy and cold. “In other words, sir, you’re suggesting that THRUSH has found a way to alter the composition of a man’s blood–and therefore his will?”

Mr. Waverly gave a troubled shrug. “A hypothesis only. Thus far, when we have aborted defection, the bodies of the defectors have either been stolen or destroyed. We have had no physical evidence to go on. Ffolkes-Pryce is the first. But it does seem like a valid, if gruesome premise. After all, those marks–” Mr. Waverly gestured vaguely.

Illya said, “Yes, the marks on his throat. Two tiny pricks.”

“I thought of the old vampire bit in London,” Solo said with a rather nervous laugh. “Castles in Transylvania, noblemen who drink blood from the victim’s throat–”

Mr. Waverly nodded slowly. “I would scoff too, but I know the depth of the technological resources of THRUSH. I also know that in principle such an idea might work. Suppose the neck impressions were the marks of small needles.”

Horrified, Solo tried to thrust the significance of it from his mind. Its irrationality terrified him. Yet as a professional operative, he could not allow himself to become emotionally unstrung by phantoms and fancies.

Still, the word *vampire* persisted in his mind.

And he saw at once that if Waverly’s version were correct, THRUSH could have found the ultimate weapon. Utilizing this weapon, THRUSH could strike at U.N.C.L.E. from within and destroy it, bringing about the victory, at last, which THRUSH had so far been unable to achieve by other means. Solo vividly remembered the pale transparent pinkish fluid dribbling down Ffolkes-Pryce’s neck, staining his collar and the Oriental rug there in the carnage of the funeral parlor–

Illya Kuryakin broke the silence: “If the lab fellows aren’t making progress, sir, what’s to be done?”

“We cannot wait for results from the lab,” Waverly replied. “We have a much more pressing assignment. It involves a young woman from our own staff who is scheduled to depart tomorrow on a most critical and delicate mission. Here, let me show you.”

Stepping to a wall console of dials and frosted glass display panels, Waverly spoke into a microphone: “Mr. Jacques, let me have the picture, please.”

The projectionist hidden away in an adjoining office answered with an affirmative syllable over the loudspeaker. A low whine filled the room. One of the display panels lit. On it appeared a full-face view of an exquisitely lovely young girl, all sandy-gold hair, wide, intelligent amber eyes, a

delicate nose and a pink, full-lipped mouth. She looked to be in her late twenties.

Napoleon Solo's fingers went white as he held the arms of his chair. *"Elisabeth!"*

Illya covered his eyes. "Good heavens."

Mr. Waverly frowned."Mr. Solo, are you feeling quite all right?"

"Yes, sir. It's just that–seeing Elisabeth's picture startled me. I haven't seen her–in person, I mean–for several months."

"Miss d'Angelo was one of our most trusted operatives in Section II," said Waverly.

Now the horror clutched tight at Solo's throat. *"Was?"*

"Two weeks ago, Miss d'Angelo began to exhibit the symptoms of which I have spoken. Fatigue. Dizziness. Nervousness. This was just a week after the start of her indoctrination for the very important mission she is scheduled to undertake for us tomorrow.

"In fact–" Mr. Waverly glanced at the ranked clock faces in various world capitols "–Miss d'Angelo is scheduled to depart Kennedy Airport for Rome at eight tomorrow morning. I am saying , Mr. Solo, that THRUSH may have hold of her. And if that is the case, she could bring destruction down on all of us. We–"

Suddenly Waverly stopped. He stared at Solo. "Oh, ah, yes. I understand. Evidently you and Miss d'Angelo have been something more than simply fellow workers?"

Remembering the tart sweetness of Elisabeth's mouth one rainy night in Central Park, Solo said with a hollow voice, "Yes, sir. We were good friends for quite a while. In the natural course of things, with assignments taking each of us all over the world, we sort of drifted away from each other. But she's still one of my–sir, they can't have gotten to Elisabeth!"

"The symptoms," said Waverly, "are identical with those of Ffolkes-Pryce and the others. I'm sorry, Mr. Solo, but that is the short of it."

Illya said, "What's this assignment she's carrying out in Rome, sir? Not something to do with the Mid-Eastern Peace Conference, is it?"

"Just that." In a gloomy tone Waverly proceeded to explain.

During recent months–as Solo and Illya both knew well–relations between two of the largest oil states in the Middle East had frayed to the breaking point. Shootings, lootings, border assaults became daily. Charges of provocation were hurled by both parties. Behind the scenes, U.N.C.L.E.

agents worked desperately to amass evidence to indicate that THRUSH was actually fomenting the trouble, hoping to touch off a Middle Eastern war and then step into the breach and seize both countries during the ensuing chaos.

In a last-minute move to head off holocaust, reasonable men from both nations had agreed to assemble in Rome for a conference to work out their difficulties. U.N.C.L.E.'s Section I cabled that it would send a top operative carrying microfilm documents and tapes to prove conclusively to the delegate's that THRUSH was behind the attacks supposedly staged by nationals of both countries.

Waverly finished: "Miss d'Angelo was the agent chosen to carry the evidence to Rome, address the delegates and present U.N.C.L.E.'s case."

Scowling, Solo said, "Why don't you pull her off the assignment? If she's involved with THRUSH–but I still can't believe that!"

On his feet, white-faced, Solo faced Waverly, who made a placating gesture.

"Mr. Solo, I have never said our people have voluntarily placed themselves under THRUSH's domination. That is what I hope you and Mr. Kuryakin may learn. Indeed, it is imperative that we do learn how THRUSH is taking over these people. And the most active case at this point is Miss d'Angelo. She is the only one of our agents currently in a position to directly sabotage and jeopardize our work in favor of THRUSH. We must prevent her, of course. But we must also seize the opportunity to learn what we can about this latest threat.

"That is why I cannot and will not cancel her assignment. Besides, to do so when her presence has already been announced to the conference delegates might possibly prejudice our position. No, Mr. Solo, even though your personal feelings are involved, I shall have to insist that you be on that flight to Rome in the morning along with Mr. Kuryakin. Your tickets are reserved. I have already sent a man to your respective flats to pack your things."

Solo turned, staring out at the rainy-drenched night skyline. He thought of Elisabeth's lovely face. Of the marks on Ffolkes-Pryce's neck. Vampire, he thought uncontrollably. *Vampire.*

Illya yawned, stood up and said softly, "*Arriverderci,* New York."

Turning, Solo glowered. His face resembled a skull. The eyes were shadowed, the cheeks tired and gaunt. "*Arriverderci* sanity would be more

like it," he said.

TWO

The thin, cold rain fell without letup all through the night. It splashed against the windshield of the taxi that carried Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin to Kennedy airport in the half light early next morning.

Solo slumped grumpily in the cab's rear seat as it swung up the drive to the large international terminal building looming in the mist. A whine of engines shook the cab faintly, indicating that the lowering weather had not yet curtailed all flights.

Illya reached in his pocket for bills to pay the driver. "A miserable morning."

"No more miserable than the mood I'm in," Solo replied.

A look of concern crossed Illya's face. "Did you manage to catch any sleep last night?"

"No. All I could think about was Elisabeth. Illya, I just can't swallow the notion that she's no longer loyal."

With a significant glance at the cabbie, Illya murmured, "Of course it is possible that it may be happening entirely against her will."

Painfully Solo recalled Elisabeth's lovely face, remembered with special poignancy their last date.

First they went to a musical at the Winter Garden. They finished the evening with a sumptuous Italian meal at a little place in the East Sixties. The chef, a burly, pink-cheeked Neapolitan, was a special friend of Elisabeth's. The chef had grown up in the hills not far from the small mountain village in Italy where Elisabeth's father had been born. Her mother had been a British mannequin whom her father had met while studying civil engineering in London.

Elisabeth was always welcome in the chef's kitchen, so she sailed to the spice cabinets and doctored the chicken cacciatore in her own special way. Even the chef applauded when he tasted it, and brought a complimentary bottle of good red wine to demonstrate his approval.

The evening ended with one of those wonderfully hokey carriage trips through the Park. Although she was a top professional, Elisabeth allowed that she loved being a helpless romantic in her off hours. Solo held her and

kissed her and they promised, quite seriously, to see one another as often as possible.

Their separate careers, and separate assignments, prevented it. But Napoleon Solo still classified Elisabeth as one of a very, very few girls who might, just might have succeeded in making him consider matrimony one of these days.

The taxi squealed to a slippery stop in front of the terminal. Rationalizing Elisabeth's potential guilt away didn't alter the fact that they were assigned to spy on a girl to whom he'd been quite close.

"I say, what a couple of deadpans," a familiar voice called as they left the cab. A young man in a tweed topcoat straight from Saville Row approached. "Considering your gloomy expressions, I'd say the worst has happened. Waverly sack you, did he?"

"Not funny, Mark," said Illya. "What are you doing here?"

Mark Slate hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "Just got in from Madrid. Cleared up that bit of mess with the bullfighter who was stealing secrets from the general's daughter at the American air base. April should be here somewhere–"

Slate turned, just as an intensely pretty, dark-haired girl in a dark green traveling suit emerged through glass doors. Both Solo and Illya said hello to their fellow agent, April Dancer. The girl noted their luggage.

"Holiday or business?" she asked.

"We're going to the Eternal City," Napoleon Solo answered. "Eight o'clock on the Air Roma flight."

April's expression grew serious. "The peace conference? Oh, of course I shouldn't ask. Well, I hope you have good luck. That's a dangerous situation shaping up there."

"Um, yes, sticky," murmured Mark. He waved. "Till we meet, and all that."

Illya Kuryakin walked to the glass doors. Solo followed, lighting a cigarette. Inside the busy building voices with a variety of accents announced flights over loudspeakers. The lights of the terminal glared in Solo's eyes. He threw his cigarette into an urn, deciding that this whole assignment was jinxed.

He had been flattered, as always, when Alexander Waverly assigned him to a top priority matter. Mr. Waverly did not give that sort of

recognition lightly. But this was one time, Solo thought, when he should have spoke up and refused.

To have to play games with Elisabeth was an idea he disliked intensely. The only reason he'd accepted the assignment at all was because he understood full well the implications of THRUSH's latest apparent scientific breakthrough.

Sensing his friend's emotional turmoil, Illya kept his voice low. "The Air Roma checkin station is just down the concourse, Napoleon. I do believe I see Elisabeth waiting at one of the desks. Yes, right down there. Smile, now. Be charming."

"I feel about as charming as a misanthrope with a liver condition."

The agents walked along the busy concourse. They had only gone half the distance to the large Air Roma checkin lounge when Elisabeth d'Angelo completed her turn and was waved through the chrome-railed aisle into the lounge proper by the smiling man at the desk.

Elisabeth acted as though she was in a hurry. She clutched the tiny pillbox hat to her head with one hand, carried a small overnight case in the other. She wore a smartly tailored suit which did justice to her figure. As Solo watched her cross the lounge, he noticed that a white dress scarf wrapped around her throat and thrust down into the V neck of her jacket.

Two things struck him–a memory of the peculiar double marks on Ffolkes-Pryce throat, and an awareness that although Elisabeth seemed to be hurrying at first glance, she was not in fact moving very rapidly across the terrazzo floor. Her step was uncertain, faltering. Several other passengers in the lounge looked up and lifted their eyebrows.

"She walks like she's drugged," Solo whispered.

Illya said, "And she's going aboard with someone. I swear I've seen that ugly face before."

Solo jerked himself back to reality. He saw Elisabeth–rather, the back of her–over by the entrance to the covered walkway which extended out to the boarding hatch of the big Air Roma jet parked on the concrete in the rain. Just beyond Elisabeth, smiling and bowing to her in greeting, was a man of large, rangy build. He smiled a great flashing white smile from positively the ugliest face Napoleon Solo had ever seen.

The man's hair was dark, neatly combed and worn long, down about his ears and neck. He carried a black topcoat over his arm. He wore a fawn

gray blazer, dark slacks, white silk shirt with a colorful ascot. The deeply-tanned man exuded an air of wealth.

But the most startling feature was his face–a square, long-jawed face. In the center a huge Cyrano nose thrust out, looking as though it had been broken several times and had not quite knit straight. His eyes were dark, intense. His brows hung out over them like cliffs of thick hair. And his eyes were strangely powerful.

The man took Elisabeth's travel case from her with a courtly little bow. While he did this, his eyes swept the lounge, searching. They lit on Solo and Illya a moment. Solo thought the man stiffened. Otherwise there was no sign of recognition.

The man bent down from his impressive height to whisper something in Elisabeth's ear. They vanished down inside the covered boarding walk.

Like the after-image of a snuffed out candle, the man's misshapen features danced in Solo's mind. That image tantalized him.

As Illya had suggested, the face was more than a familiar. But Solo couldn't place it. The face, the man's presence, his possessive attitude toward Elisabeth filled Solo with a sense of foreboding, though. He pounded his brains, trying to remember–

An ugly face. An ugly face and a brilliant smile. A face which, for all its vague echoes of brutality, nevertheless exuded a certain power or charm–*where had he seen it?*

"Gentlemen?" inquired a vice in accented English. "Your tickets?"

Solo hardly heard the comments of the gateman as he and Illya checked through. He kept staring at the plate glass, out to the big silver machine crouched on the concrete. The plane had a stylized decoration on its nose–twin boys in togas, with a wolf hovering in the background.

Romulus and Remus, the mythological twins who had founded the city of Rome. Somehow the painted wolf symbol reminded Solo of the man who had taken Elisabeth's elbow. Savage, primitive, dangerous–

"I'm still trying to remember who he is," Illya said as they proceeded across the lounge. "I'm sure I have seen his picture in the news-magazines recently."

"A European," Solo said. "Very wealthy. The playboy bit. But there's more. Nobility?"

The snap of Illya's fingers turned heads. The racing driver. A millionaire many times over. His father came from the part of Europe that

used to be Transylvania. Made a fortune in hides and fats and, some said, munitions. Count Beladrac."

Now it fell in place. "Lugo Beladrac. Count-em-up Lugo, the gossip columns call him." His state of mind took another turn for the worse.

The Count was a Grand Prix car owner and driver who took terrible chances to win. He had a reputation for getting drunk in public and totaling up, in a loud voice, the number of drivers he'd forced off the tracks of the Continent.

Count-em-up was also a reference to Beladrac's legendary luck with women. Supposedly they rained from the skies into his lap.

His driving abilities, his money, and oddly enough, his sinister ugliness attracted women by the dozen. Beladrac had a reputation for throwing girl friends away as another man would discard a banana peel. How had Elisabeth gotten involved with him?

As they walked toward the boarding ramp Illya remarked, "You know, Napoleon, I recall something else now. Once, oh, three or four years ago, there was an affair in Hungary–an informer died before he could tell very much, but he intimated that Beladrac was one of THRUSH's top agents in Europe. Because Thrush wished to protect Beladrac's cover–playboy and so forth–he was only called in for very important assignments.

An unpleasant little knot formed in Solo's stomach. "I remember that too. Nothing else ever surfaced concerning Beladrac. Our uncle didn't pay much further attention because of the lack of follow-up proof. Maybe they really were saving the count for something important. Something like–Elisabeth."

Illya shrugged. "A man is innocent until proven guilty. But let's be on guard, all the same. Frankly I wouldn't mind a chance to smash him. That ugly mug repels me."

"I wish it did the same for Elisabeth." Solo said as they moved along the covered ramp. Overhead the rain drummed dismally. "Unfortunately it doesn't look that way."

THREE

A buxom stewardess with Air Roma wings on her blouse greeted them at the entrance to the aircraft. Glancing at their tickets, she pointed. “The first class section, immediately inside. Numbers eight and ten on your right.”

The agents ducked under the low door and turned down the aisle, Solo leading. He saw that Elisabeth had already taken her place next to a window on the starboard side. Count Lugo Beladrac was standing in the aisle, pulling down a blanket from the rack above the seats. The combination of rain outside and air whistling through the interior ventilators made the cabin quite chilly.

“Excuse me,” Solo said pointedly, blocked by the count in the aisle.

Beladrac’s massive head swung around. His eyes, deep-set dark-brown, held a commanding intensity. But they looked out on the rest of the world as though it were made of dung: “In a moment, in a moment, my man. Wait your turn.” Beladrac spoke accented English.

“While you’re doing the porter’s chores,” Solo said with a forced grin, “I’ll carry on with the social amenities. Excuse me?”

He pushed Beladrac’s left elbow up out of the way, ducked under it and dropped into the seat alongside Elisabeth. Her amber eyes turned toward him, beautiful but curiously dull. At last she recognized him.

“Napoleon! What on earth–?”

“Elisabeth!” It was excruciating for Solo to keep the surprised tone in his voce, the playful smile on his face. Up close, she looked fatigued, hollow eyed. She had lost considerable weight. He glanced at the white scarf high around her throat and suppressed a shudder. “I thought I saw you back there in the boarding area. I was right. What a treat!”

Down near Elisabeth’s crossed ankles, Solo noticed her little travel case. Lined with steel, no doubt. And carefully, secretly compartmentalized to contain the tapes and microfilm spools she was carrying to the Mid-Eastern Peace Conference. Its lock looked flimsy, but Solo recognized the particular patina of the brass plating and the lock’s heart shape. Capable of being opened only by a three-prong key, the incredibly durable cases were frequently carried by female U.N.C.L.E. couriers.

Solo glanced back to Elisabeth's face, ignoring Beladrac's loud breathing at his elbow. "I assume you're on business, Elisabeth?" She fought back a yawn. "A little errand for that relative–" She blinked. He'd never seen her less quick. "My uncle–"

A nod from Solo. "Illya and I are heading east from Rome."

Solo fabricated that bit because he felt it would be imprudent to give Elisabeth's traveling companion any information. He needn't have worried. The traveling companion was more interested in giving him information, as Solo discovered when a powerful hand clamped down on his shoulder.

"Your American lack of good manners is only exceeded by your other offensive qualities, *signor.* Be so good as to vacate my seat."

The count's hand squeezed down hard on Solo's shoulder, increasing the pressure. Pain sprang up along Solo's arm as he tapped the hairy back of the count's hand with his index finger. "Be so good as to get your paw off my suit. The press isn't that permanent, you know."

The count kept the pressure on for another second or so. The pain got really bad. Solo's temper reddened to the point where he was ready to strike out, smash that immensely ugly face. Then, abruptly, Beladrac let go.

That huge white smile, incongruous in the ugly face, flopped into place. Beladrac took off his expensive Tyrolean hat and turned the brim in his fingers, staring right past Solo at Elisabeth:

"Out of courtesy to you, darling, we won't have a scene. I take it these clods are friends?"

"Yes, we know each other," Elisabeth faltered. "Lugo, this is Napoleon Solo. That's Illya Kuryakin across the aisle. This is Count Lugo Beladrac, my–my fiance."

Solo tried to keep his face a blank, but his stomach was churning. "Well Elisabeth. I didn't know you believed in short engagements. Or do you?" He indicated her left hand. The spot where normally a ring would be worn was bare.

Count Beladrac laughed. "We plan to take care of the formalities when Elisabeth concludes her dreary business in Rome. She won't tell me what it is, apart from some vague references to governmental work. For my part, I am just as happy not to know. Bourgeois pursuits bore me. I intend to take Elisabeth off to my villa. There she will select her own engagement ring stone from the jewel chest which has belonged to the Beladrac family for

seven centuries. I suppose you cannot comprehend such a procedure, can you *signor?* The American five-and-tencent-store mentality at work–”

That tore it. Solo rocketed up out of the seat, his fist balling. Illya leaped into the aisle. The stewardess, approaching with a sheaf of gold-embossed menus, put a hand to her throat and gasped.

Elisabeth threw off her strange lethargy and caught Solo’s hand, restraining it. Count Beladrac’s face was quite close to Solo’s, the ugly countenance lit by a malicious expression which acknowledged a new, secret understanding between them.

Elisabeth said in a strained voice: “Please, Napoleon. Please. For my sake, don’t–”

Fighting for control, Solo shrugged. “Okay. You must have met him in a zoo, but–”

Beladrac chuckled again. “On the contrary, Elisabeth drives a little sports car, you know. I was spending some time with guests on Long Island. We met at a dreadfully boring little rally. Does that satisfy your craving for gossip, Mr.—ah–Solo? “

And Beladrac stared him down with a stare that said, *I know who you are.* Or was Solo misinterpreting?

Angered, not a little displeased with himself, Solo wondered whether Beladrac was merely a boor whom Elisabeth, in paradoxical feminine fashion, had fallen for, or whether there was some other, more sinister connection. He sighed, forced another smile, lifted himself from Beladrac’s seat.

Beladrac stepped forward to claim it. Solo turned his back and bent over Elisabeth. He patted her cheek, managing to shield his movements from the count as he hooked his little finger under the edge of her scarf and lifted it for the shortest part of a second. He murmured something polite and inane to cover the gesture–

There were no marks on Elisabeth’s neck.

Elisabeth didn’t even notice his little stratagem because her senses were so dulled. Solo saw that in her eyes, in the way she blinked once and slowly pushed her pink mouth into a smile. “Napoleon, it’s kind of you–I don’t know what to say, except–” Lost, she faltered, stopped.

“Have a nice flight, Elisabeth.” Solo drew his hand away.

Beladrac flashed him another glare. “We shall, if you don’t force further conversation on us.”

With the smell of danger rising in his nostrils, Solo crawled across Illya's knees and dropped into the seat beside the window.

Count Beladrac hitched himself around in his seat. He faced Elisabeth, so that his back shielded her from the agents across the aisle. The stewardess walked through, checking on fastened seatbelts. The hatchways slammed shut. The boarding ramp telescoped away from the side of the huge four-engine jet. Rain beat on the wings. The pilot started the engines one at a time.

The Air Roma plane began to taxi. The noise level had increased to the point where Solo felt safe whispering to Illya: "Something's wrong with her, right enough. Very wrong."

Across the aisle, the count burst out with a laugh. Illya said, "And the cause might be a little bird, eh?"

"Yes, a thrush. We may have walked into some nasty trouble. I had the distinct impression that the count knows who we are and what we represent."

"Rome will tell." Illya closed his eyes. "Meantime, if you will permit me–"

And in almost seconds he dropped off to sleep.

Solo chewed his thumb. He watched the runway slide by slowly under the wings. Within a few seconds the great plane lifted into the rain and headed out over the Atlantic.

FOUR

On the speaker system, the stewardess announced in Italian that the Air Roma jet would be landing in the Eternal City in just a few minutes. Captain Rizzolo had already commenced his descent, and would the ladies and gentlemen kindly refrain from smoking as soon as the multi-lingual warning signs flashed on?

The stewardess then repeated her information in English. Napoleon Solo gestured, trying to get Elisabeth's attention. The girl's sandy-gold hair gleamed with a lovely luster in the glow of the tiny reading spotlight shining down from above her. The seat beside her was vacant. The count had excused himself a few moments ago. Solo and Illya had exchanged places earlier.

Solo reached across the aisle. "Elisabeth? Elisabeth, I'd like to say–"

"No use," Illya interrupted. "The poor girl must be exhausted. She's asleep."

Little tension lines formed around Solo's mouth. This appeared to be the case. Elisabeth swayed ever so gently from side to side in her seat, her body stirred by the vibration of the great jet engines through metal of the fuselage.

What damnable drug was already in her body, reducing her from the lively, quick-witted creature he'd known to the kind of limp hulk he watched now? Solo started to thrust up out of his seat. Perhaps if he slipped over beside her, he could wake her. This was his only opportunity. Beladrac hadn't left the cabin until just moments ago. He moved in her direction–

A soft clicking to his left caught Solo's attention. A flame glared. Solo turned, knowing he'd been discovered. He recovered his aplomb, smoothed his tie as the count emerged from the first class lavatory.

The count tossed and caught the massive, gold filigree lighter with which he'd lit his cigarette. He strode down the aisle, moved into his seat to block Solo's view of the girl again.

"Of course you were just getting up to use the facilities, eh?" the count inquired mockingly.

"Of course," Solo murmured. Fuming, he walked up the aisle.

He stepped inside the tiny cubicle, latched the door. An idea had suggested itself. He pulled out his pocket communicator. He adjusted the calibrations so that the device would not interfere with any of the communications instruments aboard the aircraft. He called for channel D to open.

Mr. Waverly was out of headquarters for the evening. Did agent Solo wish him contacted? No, Solo merely wanted to be put through to the duty officer in Identifications.

In a moment he was in contact, asking that the computers check their voluminous memories concerning the count and THRUSH. The very quickness with which the duty officer replied indicated a negative check:

"Code condition blue forty-ought, Mr. Solo. That's–"

"–an indication of a possible connection only."

"Correct, sir. Nothing at all definite."

Solo said thanks and switched off. Perhaps he was letting jealousy foul him. It was true that after the initial rumors a few years ago, nothing else had connected the count to the supra-nation. Perhaps the informer who mentioned the count's name had some personal grudge, and decided to settle it as best he could before dying. Such things happened.

Puzzled and uncertain about his next step, Solo returned to his seat. He noticed as he sat down that Elisabeth had wakened. She gave a listless smile.

"Napoleon, I'm sorry we won't–" She faltered. She brushed at her forehead. Beladrac looked bland for a change, as though he didn't notice. "–won't have a chance to have dinner in Rome."

"I am too, Elisabeth. Though I'm sure the count wouldn't enjoy it."

"Quite right, *signor."*

Lugo Beladrac treated Napoleon Solo to one of those full-toothed, insulting grins that broke his incredibly ugly face into a webwork of wrinkles.

Solo's pulse hammered with anger. He sat down, wondered how high his blood pressure had shot. Waverly would discipline him if he tore into Beladrac merely because the man was boorish and insulting. Yet what satisfaction it would give him. What intense satisfaction!

Soon the *no smoking* signs lit, and the great jetliner drifted gently downward toward the lights of Rome spread across the seven hills and for miles into the distance. The jet swooped in for its landing.

As soon as the stewardess unfastened the hatch, Count Beladrac took Elisabeth's arm and steadied her out into the aisle. The count shoved a couple of other passengers rather rudely, with the result that he and Elisabeth were the second couple to leave the first class section. Solo went to claim his topcoat, his mind flashing with an image of Elisabeth's little travel bag bobbing in her gloved right hand as she walked off the plane.

Normally quick to follow his friend, Illya Kuryakin had remained in his seat by the window. He hunched far back, so that he could not be easily seen from outside. Then, abruptly, Illya jumped up.

"I waited to watch the count going into the terminal, Napoleon. He used that heavy gold lighter again."

Irritable and tired from the long trip, Solo said, "What's so unusual about that?"

"Oh, nothing, apart from the fact that he didn't have a cigarette in his mouth. Count Beladrac appeared to be holding the lighter close to his face, examining it. Or talking into it. We'd best be careful."

"And we'd better hurry up about it. I want to follow them."

"There's no evidence that our friend is–from the birds. Just your hunch."

As they stepped from the plane and clattered down the metal stairs, Solo affirmed that this was correct. Quickly he told Illya about the talk with New York, the negative report.

"But I still think he knew who we were. I mean, what organization we represent. It could be just coincidence, his traveling with Elisabeth. And yet–"

"I sense that the green devils of envy are stoking the fires of your imagination, Napoleon."

"It may be that, all right. But it won't hurt to tag after them. Elisabeth's too foggy to notice. And if Beladrac's a professional, he'll notice right away. If he doesn't, then we can cross him off and look for threats against Elisabeth from some other quarter."

By now they had entered the terminal proper. Italian officials waited to check their papers and luggage. Across the brightly-lit chamber, the count and Elisabeth were just completing the formalities, claiming their luggage and heading out along the concourse, presumably toward the motor park.

Fortunately the authorities only took a few moments to clear the agents. Solo risked using his U.N.C.L.E. identification to speed things along.

“This way,” Solo called, heading left along the clattering concourse. “We’ll get the bags later.”

He broke into a half run. Elisabeth and the count were disappearing in the crowd ahead.

Solo and Illya fought their way through the throng, murmuring apologies in English and Italian. They had gone perhaps a dozen yards when they spotted a strange-looking group coming toward them–a man, his wife, and two youngsters of a size to be perhaps eight or nine.

The man wore a cheap suit and a red lodge fez. The woman carried a straw bag full of souvenirs, was thin-faced and hard-eyed. The children, a boy and a girl, dogged after them. The boy scuffed along with his head down, his face concealed by a child’s fedora. The girl wore a straw hat which likewise hid her face.

The man, beefy and red nosed, angled toward Solo with one hand gripped around an expensive camera on a leather neck strap, Illya tried to dodge. The tourists were quicker, cutting them off:

“Why, hello there! It’s Cousin Eustis from the States!” cried the man, seizing Solo’s arm and shoving him back against the concourse wall. The man’s breath smelled of garlic but he spoke with all the perfection of an American from the Midwest.

“Cousin Eustis and his friend,” said the woman, crowding in on one side of Illya. Her eyes were stone-bright.

The children were out of sight behind their parents. A few Italians passing glanced at the loud-mouthed family distastefully. Otherwise the people paid no attention.

“I’m not your cousin, you simpleton,” Solo fumed. “Get out of my way and–”

He saw the man’s hand rise toward the lens barrel of the camera, touch what looked like the shutter release. A cloud of purple gas squirted from a tiny hole in the lens cap. Solo reacted instantly and drove backwards against Illya with a warning shout.

Illya was knocked off balance. Solo righted himself, catching a whiff of purplish gas. A choking nauseous feeling rose in his throat. Something came winking at him from the right.

He whirled. The woman’s stiletto, evidently drawn from her phony tourist handbag, stabbed at his throat like a glittering needle. Solo caught

the woman's wrist. He deflected the blow but the blades' needle tip nearly hit his cheek anyway.

Illya, meantime, was having troubles of his own.

The two children swarmed around his legs. From under a shawl she carried, the girl produced a small nickeled pistol which she pointed at Illya's midsection. He batted her arm. In doing so, his elbow caught the brim of the little boy's junior-sized fedora. The hat flicked off–

The bogus boy raised a tough, leathery, middle-aged midget's face. A gun flashed in his hand. The phony father maneuvered to give Solo another squirt of the gas. Solo squeezed the woman's wrist. She dropped the knife.

The disguised midgets–the girl's hat had come off in the struggle; she had a tough, runty little harridan's face too–caught Illya between them. He dropped flat just as the pair of pistols went off.

Someone in the crowd screamed and fell. Solo shoved the woman away from him so hard that she stumbled. The bogus father used the opportunity to grab Solo's shoulder, spin him around and release a blast of gas in his face. The gas caught him full in the nose, making his lungs vibrate with pain. He groped for the man with the camera.

The man danced backward, snarling low: "One dose of that stuff, *signor,* and your uncle will be seeking a new nephew."

Solo's lungs burned. The midgets were trying to elude Illya. He was scrambling across the floor, trying to catch them by their ankles. A large crowd was gathering, though people seemed uncertain whether the fight was genuine, or some sort of movie stunt, because of the bizarre presence of the dwarfs.

The false father called out sharply in Italian. The midgets scuttled away after him through the crowd.

On his knees with everything turning and whirling around him, Solo heard Illya say: "Napoleon, if that gas is lethal we must find a doctor."

"You get after Elisabeth. Don't lose her."

Solo lifted his head. His eyes blazed a moment, fierce, hard with the force of his command. "Do it, Illya, Elisabeth is the one who matters now."

He didn't have to explain to Illya that she mattered because this attempted assassination proved beyond all doubt that Beladrac worked for THRUSH, and had called in helpers to do away with the agents because he had recognized them.

Excited voices babbled in Italian all around them. “Napoleon, I can’t leave. The gas may be–”

“Get after her!” Solo shouted. Professionalism won. Illya stood up. He turned and dashed away.

This could be it, Solo thought. His eyes watered. Faces, bodies pressing in around him were vague smears rather than clearly defined things. His lungs burned and burned. He lurched to his feet. He swayed like a drunken man, his hair unkempt, his suit a mess. A portly woman at the edge of the crowd moaned and crossed herself. Air. That’s what he needed. It was air–

Solo’s vision dimmed even more. He wondered how far into his system the lethal gas had worked. He charged at the crowd like a blinded bull. People scattered. Ahead, Solo made out the chromium rails encircling another lounge area, this one deserted. He stumbled against the railing, slid to his knees.

Panting, he rested his cheek against the cool metal. Far away, he recognized the Italian words someone was shouting. They were calling for the nearest policeman.

Napoleon Solo gathered up all the strength he had left and dragged himself between the rails into the lounge. He picked up one of the plastic chairs. It seemed to weigh heavy as all the earth. He smashed the chair against the plate glass window of the lounge.

The glass exploded outward. Solo lurched forward again, stepped across the upthrusting points of glass still in the frame and fell forward. His cheek slid in a patch of oil as he came to rest on the concrete, belly down.

He sucked in great hungry gulps of night air tainted with the stink of airplane fuel. Everything darkened–Wondering if he’d ever wake again, he blacked out completely.

FIVE

Illya Kuryakin ran like a madman, and a madman without manners at that. He thrust men and women aside bodily in his wild race to the main doors which led to the motor park. A policeman approached on the left, jabbering at him and waving a wand, ordering him to stop.

Quickly Illya dodged around an old gentleman, circled a woman carrying a baby, plunged through a set of glass doors. Taxi men beckoned him. He ignored them, racing to the parking area.

Down one of the ranks of parked vehicles, an impressive pale gray Rolls-Royce was backing out of its slot. As the car backed around, Illya saw sandy-gold hair flash briefly in the rear window.

Bent double below the rear window sight line, Illya ran as he'd seldom ran before. He caught up to the Rolls just as it completed its backing maneuver. At the instant the driver shifted the gears forward, Illya stepped onto the bumper with his right shoe. Illya dragged his left shoe up while his fingers found uneasy purchase above.

The Rolls gathered speed. Right away he knew he couldn't hang on for long. He'd caught them. But it would be empty victory when he fell off onto the pavement in a few more seconds. His fingers were slipping, slipping already–

ACT II

GRAND PRIX OF DEATH

The Rolls glided down the aisle between parked vehicles. A pair of lovers kissing in an open Fiat convertible sat up and pointed. No doubt he looked ridiculous, Illya thought, attempting to cling to the rear end of the large luxury car. He felt ridiculous, doubly so when he realized that the occupants of the Rolls must have seen the startled expressions and the gestures of the boy and girl in the Fiat.

Just as the Rolls reached the last cars parked in the rank and started its left turn into the exit lane, the driver hit the brake pedal. Illya's skull bounced against metal in the center of the drive.

Beladrac, an impressive pistol in one fist, hopped out of the tonneau. Illya scrambled up. The chauffer bore in. Illya's right fist punched deep and hard into the chauffer's midsection. The man went *oomph* and doubled. Illya knee-lifted him away, just as Beladrac's ugly face loomed around to his right.

Illya whirled, tried to raise his arm to block the chopping pistol-blow the count was smashing down onto his head. Beladrac used his free hand to seize Illya's wrist, twist his guard aside. Falling, Illya heard the count cry in a loud voice, "That will teach you, vermin! The young lady may have been your girlfriend last week, but she now prefers a nobleman to a penniless student. Your insane tactics won't change that."

The chauffer had Illya by the throat now, throttling him while the count continued his declamation for the benefit of the startled lovers in the Fiat. "Come, come, fellow! We'll take you home to your nasty little flat. You can sober up there.

Illya was by now lying on the ground. Beladrac hissed at the chauffer: "Get the needle into his arm, you–" A string of Italian obscenities here.

Writhing, Illya Kuryakin hit at the chauffer's face, missed. Beladrac stepped on his midsection. Something silver-cool and sharp pricked through the fabric of his coat. He tried to roll away from it.

Beladrac laughed, booted him in the side of the head, then gave forth with another small oration about the viciousness of the lower classes.

Illya was dizzy. A strange lassitude accompanied the dizziness. He tried to punch at the chauffer again. His muscles seemed to be operating in slow motion. Finally his knuckles connected with the chauffer's chin, grazing it, but it felt as though he'd smacked cotton-candy instead of something solid.

His adversaries gave him room. Illya flopped over on his side. He stuck his hand out toward the bumper of the Rolls-Royce. It seemed to recede from him like a planet whirling away through immense spaces.

At last he caught hold of the metal. He got his other hand on the bumper too. In that way he dragged himself forward to where he could push himself up, stand goggling at the lights of the motor park that whirled and blurred like speeding comets.

Against the backdrop of the lights and the night sky Illya saw the looming immensity of Count Lugo Beladrac's ugly face. The count's teeth shone like mirrors. In the depths of his eyes, hatred flickered.

"All right, clod. If you can walk, get yourself in the car. We'll drive you home."

Dimly seen past the count's shoulder, the young couple from The Fiat watched curiously. Illya held out his hands to them. He shouted with the full strength of his lungs that he was being dragged into a trap, that the count was going to take him away and kill him.

No sound came from his throat. His mouth worked in silence. Sweat popped out on his forehead. He began to shudder as the drug that had been injected into his bloodstream worked its full effect. Suddenly his legs betrayed him. He sprawled on the concrete, seized by violent convulsions.

Beladrac laughed coldly somewhere. The chauffer seized Illya by the armpits, dragged him up to the front of the Rolls-Royce, opened the door and folded him onto the floorboards of the front seat.

As the auto gathered speed, sweeping out of the motor park, Illya heard a voice he recognized as Elisabeth's murmur dazedly from the back seat: "What–what's wrong with Mr. Kuryakin, Lugo?"

"Probably a touch of air sickness, my dear."

"Yes, but why was he following us? Why was he attacking you?"

"Oh, no doubt something to do with that fellow Napoleon Solo's insane jealousy. Don't fret over it."

“I don’t understand.” Elisabeth sounded terribly foggy, uncertain of the very words she said. “Lord, I wish I could rest. I’m so tired–”

Count Beladrac’s voice dropped to a low, soothing note: “Shortly, my dearest. It’s been a tiring trip. I’ll see that you have the proper chance to gather your strength before you do–ah–whatever it is you must do here in Rome.”

Teetering on the brink of consciousness, Illya thought one word wildly–*Liar!*

Count Lugo Beladrac knew full well what Elisabeth’s mission was in Rome. Illya was convinced of it now. And just as obviously Elisabeth couldn’t properly interpret what had just happened because of her weakened condition.

From the rear seat drifted an intermingling of voices, Beladrac’s urging her to put her head down on his shoulder and rest, Elisabeth’s drowsily protesting that she couldn’t fathom why Illya Kuryakin would be pursuing the count’s car, would be trying to start a fight with the count, or why the count had taken Illya along–

“But, my dear,” the count said softly, “we couldn’t leave him lying there, could we?”

“N–no, I suppose not. But what will you–”

“Drop him off at a hotel, naturally. Find him a room where he can sleep it off. Then we’ll be free to go about our own affairs, you and I.” Beladrac’s voice dropped lower, whispering words which sounded sickeningly, cloyingly affectionate.

But Illya knew he couldn’t stay awake much longer. It was a fight, just lying there half paralyzed, trying to stay awake and listen. Plainly Elisabeth didn’t know about Count Beladrac’s connection with THRUSH.

Still, she was not as yet completely under the influence of THRUSH’s newest drug. Illya heard her protesting softly again. “Lugo darling, these are friends of mine, Napoleon and Illya, wouldn’t attack anyone because of jealousy. It isn’t like them.

“You mustn’t trouble your head about it, my dear.”

“Is Illya awake? Let me talk to him, Lugo.”

Desperately Illya tried to make a sound. His throat felt clogged, wooden. The chauffer moved his left boot over so that it was resting on Illya’s temple, pressing his head to the mat much harder than was necessary.

The chauffer said, “The foreigner is sleeping, *signorina.”*

“I just can’t think quite right,” came Elisabeth’s plaintive voice. “These past few weeks I don’t know what’s come over me. If I could only concentrate–Lugo, perhaps Illya’s sick. Perhaps he really needs help. Should we get him to a doctor?” Her breathing was labored. Long pauses punctuated each few words she spoke.

You’re the one who needs help, Elisabeth, Illya’s mind screamed silently.

Elisabeth’s voice faded away to a sleepy protest. The motor of the Rolls-Royce hummed whisper-quiet. Illya lost track of time.

Perhaps he’d been out for a few seconds. Or several minutes. At any rate, he caught a fragment of the chauffer’s sentence: “–shall I proceed as we’re going, Excellence?”

“Naturally not, you cabbage. And not so loud! The girl has dropped off. Wretched little fool, to think I could be seriously interested in her. These Americans have such terrible egos. When they join U.N.C.L.E., it becomes far worse. Well, we shall prick their little bubble soon enough. Take the next turn-around. Phone the airfield to have the plane ready. We’ll take off immediately for Nice. We can carry that U.N.C.L.E. agent in the baggage space. We’ll keep him out of sight from *Signorina* d’Angelo. Of course our story will be that we delivered him to his hotel. Are you quite clear on that?”

“Perfectly, Excellence.”

All this Illya Kuryakin half heard, lying with his cheek against the ridged matting on the floor of the front seat. The convulsions began again. His fingertips turned cold, seemed to be full of tiny needles. The humming of the Rolls motor increased to a piercing whine. Illya knew it was all in his head. Solo’s face flashed into his thoughts.

Was Napoleon dead? Had the lethal gas that squirted from the camera of the bogus tourist finished him? Illya hoped desperately that it wasn’t so. Napoleon remained the only hope now.

He tried to move one last time. Consuming weariness overcame him. The struggle against the injection became too much. Somewhere far away he heard Count Beladrac humming a cheerful Italian folk-melody.

The car swung in a long curve, heading back the way it had come.

TWO

Napoleon Solo was just about half alive. At least he felt that way.

Dawn was just breaking as the taxi deposited him in front of the luxurious Hotel Penti in downtown Rome. Solo's whole frame shook with an annoying ague. It had been with him ever since he awakened around midnight in the charity ward where he had been taken by the police. They had dragged him off the tarmac at the airfield and into an ambulance.

At least that was the way it was explained to him. He had no recollection of anything until he woke in a clean bed with a hellish ache in his midsection–his stomach had been pumped repeatedly–and the ague shaking him from end to end.

He spent the rest of the night alternately receiving injections and oral medications from a team of doctors and arguing with a rotund, mustached inspector of the metropolitan police who turned up at his bedside around one.

Fortunately Solo still had his identification with him, and his pocket communicator. The inspector spoke, in uncertain English, with Mr. Alexander Waverly in New York. Mr. Waverly vouched for Solo. The chief of Policy and Operations was circumspect, however. He told the inspector nothing of Solo's assignment, only that he must be given all necessary medical attention and released as quickly as possible.

This galled the policeman. But a phone call moments later from the inspector's superior, whom Waverly had also contacted, silenced his protests effectively. Solo was spared the burden of answering questions, though he did ask the inspector a few.

"And in your condition," said one of the physicians, "it is imperative that you rest for at least three days, *signor."*

"Send a nurse for my clothes," Solo countered. "I've got to get out of here."

"But that is impossible! In addition, it is potential suicide!"

"Where are my clothes?"

"You cannot!" insisted the doctor. "The after-effects of that particular gas are extremely debilitating, and could result in loss of–"

"Never mind."

Solo stuck his legs out of bed. He stood up. He nearly pitched forward on his face. Cold sweat popped out all over his cheeks as he took a lurching step. “I’ll find my things myself.”

With practically the entire staff of the hospital washing their hands of further responsibility, Napoleon Solo teetered out into the light of false dawn. The waiting taxi deposited him in front of the Penti.

The hotel’s glass high-rise front caught the first shafts of sunlight from the east. The doorman, elegant in gold braid and a peaked cap, studiously studied his shoe tips and permitted Solo to open the main door himself. With his clothes a mess and his beard sprouting, Solo hardly fit in with the clientele to whom the Penti catered–film stars, magnates, diplomats.

Solo crossed the lobby, teeth chattering from the chill. He thought about Illya Kuryakin. He wondered what happened to him.

And Elisabeth and Beladrac, where had they gone? Elisabeth was due to register here at the Penti, where the Mid-Eastern Peace Conference was being held. Solo approached a clerk in fawn-gray morning coat who stood behind the registration desk.

He asked for the room number of Laszlo Prentiss. With some reluctance, but obviously unwilling to argue with the glare in Solo’s eyes, the clerk told him.

Moments later, Solo pounded on the door of a room on the eighth floor. “Prentiss? Open up.”

“Hullo? What? Who is it? Oh, hang on: I’m coming.”

The door was opened by a gangling, yawning fellow with a lantern jaw and untidy mop of red hair going gray at the temples. The man scratched his belly under his pajamas, blinked.

“Napoleon! We’d given you up for lost. What the devil happened to you?”

Solo thrust past the gangling man into the dim room. “If you’ve got any brandy I’ll tell you.”

Laszlo Prentiss was one of Section II operatives assigned to the U.N.C.L.E. station in Rome. He shut and bolted the door, flicked on a desk lamp. Solo, meantime, had already spotted the cognac and was pouring a healthy glassful from the heavy decanter.

He sloshed it down. Ordinarily he was against operatives drinking heavily while on assignment. It dulled the mind and often made the difference between the correct, instantaneous response to danger and the

wrong delayed one. This morning, though, with the after-effects of the noxious gas seething through his system, he needed something to keep him from falling over on his face. The whole affair was crumbling apart. The smell of disaster was ripe in his nostrils.

Laszlo Prentiss stood with hands in the pocket of his bathrobe as Solo sketched in some of the details of what was happening. Solo didn't spell out the exact nature of the latest THRUSH threat. The fewer field operatives who knew about the possibility of massive drug-induced treachery in the ranks, the better. He did intimate that THRUSH was hatching a potentially disastrous scheme to gain control of the organization, and that Elisabeth was one of the possible guinea pigs for the operation.

Prentiss clicked his tongue at this. "Don't know a thing about that, old chap. I was merely assigned to look after her once she got here. I checked into the Penti last Monday, when the conference began. Then, around dinner time last evening, Waverly called in on Channel F. He was cryptic. Said you and Kuryakin were on the way. That we should extend every cooperation, etcetera. I stayed awake half the night awaiting a phone call, either from Elisabeth checking in, or from you and Illya. When neither came, I fell asleep. You don't know where Illya is?"

"Haven't the faintest," Solo replied, his forced lightness hiding his painfully deep concern.

"Well, Miss d'Angelo isn't in the hotel either."

Solo's eyebrows shot up. "Where is she?"

"When she didn't show up according to schedule, I got my little network helpers working. A few thousand lire grease the informational skids quite nicely y'know. Miss d'Angelo telephoned the hotel early last evening. Actually, a man relayed her message. She was leaving Rome for the weekend. Would return and claim her room early Monday morning, when the conference resumes."

Now Solo's belly tightened up. "*Resumes?* It's broken off?"

"Afraid so. Late yesterday. THRUSH has worked its dirty work well. Even those gents at the conference table–cooler types than you'll find in either of the two capitols of the two countries involved–are convinced that the delegates from the other side are a pack of charlatans and liars.

"The conference has been foundering for almost a week. Tempers getting short. Yesterday it turned into a real screaming match. Threats of war out in the open. The chairman banged his gavel as soon as I got to him

with the news that our uncle was sending an agent with material to prove that all of the trouble has been fermented by THRUSH. The chairman got the delegates to adjourn until Monday morning. It's a very touchy situation. If Miss d'Angelo doesn't show up with the proper information, I'm afraid everything from the Sudan to Suez is going to blow."

Holding the empty tumbler in his hands, Solo paced the thick carpet. "And Elisabeth has gone off somewhere. Been taken, probably. By that damn ugly count."

"Beladrac!" said Prentiss. "You mentioned him before. The sports car driver?"

Solo gave a tight nod. "Rich. Ugly as sin. And probably a top THRUSH agent."

A low whistle from Prentiss. "That last part I didn't know."

"Well, there's a lot I don't know, Laszlo, and some I can't tell you. I do know this. If Elisabeth is with the count, it's not because he gives a hang about her, though she's going around saying they're engaged. And the last I saw of Illya at the airport, he was chasing them."

He went on to fill in more of the details of the attack at the field, including Beladrac's use of his heavy gold filigree lighter as an apparent communications device to summon help. "Now the question is," Solo finished, "where the devil has the count gone?"

Prentiss thought a moment. "Let's see. He's all over the social pages week after week. I'm sure he has a villa on the Riviera. Saw a picture spread on it recently. Posh place. And wasn't there something written up about sports car trials in Monte Carlo this weekend? I'll check."

Prentiss streaked for the phone. Moments later he put the receiver back on its prongs.

"One of our fellows is going to look into it right now. He'll phone back as soon as he can. Meantime, how about a shower and some breakfast? Room service should be open. I say, you really do look like the proverbial walking corpse. Are you going to make it?"

"I'll make it, Laszlo. I've got to. Where's the shower?"

Three

Shortly Prentiss' associate telephoned back. Prentiss stuck his head around the bathroom door jamb and yelled at Solo in the steaming shower cabinet.

“Our dear friend the playboy count has a private aircraft which he keeps at the airport. It took off shortly past midnight. The flight plan he filed listed Nice as the destination. There were three passengers, the chauffer-pilot, the count himself, and a Miss Andrews.”

“I’ll get a plane,” Solo bawled back over the hiss of the water.

“Bit of difficulty there, old chap. My associate says the airport is swarming with well-known THRUSH agents.”

“Then there isn’t much doubt any more that Beladrac is running the operation.”

“No,” said Prentiss, scratching his chin. “I suppose there isn’t. Funny, that. A playboy who fools around motor cars and women. I suppose it is a top notch cover. This one must be something big if he hasn’t surface until now.”

You don’t know how big, Solo thought as the hot water needles drove against his skin. He felt a little better. A good substantial breakfast had helped reduce the nausea and pain.

At nine-thirty in the morning a delivery van arrived at the Rome airport with a medium-sized crate marked for a pet shop in Nice. The crate was perforated wit air holes. Without incident, the crate was loaded into the freight blister of the mid-morning flight for the Riviera.

Napoleon Solo rode uncomfortably to Nice inside the wooden box which had effectively hoodwinked the THRUSH agents watching the Rome terminal. If things hadn’t been so serious, Solo would have barked once or twice in the box for the sake of realism.

FOUR

Clink-Clank

Plink-zenk-spang

Hammer, hammer, hammer

Illya Kuryakin listened to the unusual noises as he floated back to consciousness. It sounded as though hand tools were being used to straighten out a piece of sheet metal, and to adjust reluctantly rusty belts.

Against the background of these tool noises, men conversed. At least three, perhaps more. Illya thought he recognized the voice of Count Beladrac among them. Catching phrases in French and Italian, Illya translated a word here and there.

Magneto.

Supercharger.

Tachometer.

And something about an auto-control. The interchanges sounded oddly professional and cheery.

The last thing Illya remembered was falling into the hands of THRUSH at the Rome airport. How, then, had it come to pass that he was hearing talk which more appropriately belonged in an auto race maintenance pit? Where–

A chilling burst of memory filled in the blurred edges of the mental picture. In addition to being a THRUSH agent of high rank, Count Beladrac drove *grand prix* cars.

"Sssssh!" someone hissed near at hand. Then, in French: "Excellence, he's waking up."

"So he is," Beladrac's voice responded. "Guilliame, make certain those ropes are secure."

Illya's arms were stretched around his back, lashed together at the wrists behind the upright portion of an old wooden chair in which he sat. He opened his eyes. Light blazed in his face. The smell of oil and gasoline drifted into his nostrils.

Tied hand and foot to the chair, Illya was a prisoner in what appeared to be a large auto garage. The walls were lined with parts cabinets and workbenches equipped with sophisticated metal-working tools. Directly

ahead of him, Illya saw three gleaming bullet-shaped Formula One driving machines.

The one nearest to him looked the most dilapidated of the lot. Its metal bonnet displayed several deep dents. A mechanic in a greasy coverall was busy stringing wires from holes in the bonnet back to the driver's cockpit. Another mechanic was working on the lug nuts of the right rear tire with an air wrench.

This car, a metallic blue, was one Illya recognized as an exceedingly fast American-powered Shelley-Python. Beyond it stood a red Ashworth-Marti. The third car was a blazing yellow Ferrante. Those two were covered with large clear plastic sheets. Only the near vehicle, the Shelley-Python, was being worked on.

The mechanics paused in their work. All of them turned to stare at him. None of them seemed unusually hostile, merely curious, but Illya noted a pistol butt sticking from one man's pocket.

A shadow fell across his knees. Count Beladrac stepped around from behind, towering up against the tin-shaded bulbs which hung from the garage ceiling. The count wore a spotless white coverall. He was smoking a cigarette of gold-wrapped paper in a long ivory holder. As he smiled, his hideous face again displayed that amazing amount of dental ware.

"Good evening, Kuryakin. Glad to see you've come around."

Illya glowered. "I'm not so certain I'm glad. How much of that stuff did you shoot into me?"

"Three doses," Beladrac flicked ash away. "Actually you have been unconscious for nearly twenty-four hours. I thought it more prudent to keep you quiet. We're in the cellar of my home, you see." A gesture at the ceiling. "Just a few miles from Nice. Elisabeth is upstairs at the moment. She's changing for dinner. She doesn't know you're here. I prefer to keep it that way. As soon as my associates have rigged the car and you're off on your little ride, I'll join Elisabeth and she won't be the wiser.

The count bent forward and waved the hot tip of the cigarette beneath Illya's nose. "I would be delighted to have her know and appreciate the fact of your death. On the other hand, I mustn't let personal wishes stand in the way of the entire operation. I must settle for knowing that you are being finished off. Perhaps one day I'll tell her how it happened."

Deep in Illya's belly a cold knot of fear formed.

“I smashed up the Shelly last November at Volkerstone, don’t you see?” continued the count. “She’ll never race again, except for her last ride in just a few minutes now. As long as we plan to scrap her anyway, it occurred to me that we might employ her as your–”

The count paused. His ugly face looked all the more sadistic because of the toothy smile “–your death-engine, so to speak.”

The mechanics were working on the car again. One man in coveralls had his head buried in the cockpit. He used a soldering iron to connect several of the wires which ran back from the bonnet and around the windscreen.

“Then you do work for THRUSH,” said Illya.

“Certainly. Miss d’Angelo does not know that. Yet. I am only her ardent suitor as far as she knows.”

“You brought her here to sabotage the Peace Conference in Rome.”

The count’s forehead puckered. “I don’t feel I am at liberty to discuss details, Kuryakin. I will say this.” He leaned close again, grinning. “U.N.C.L.E. is finished. War is going to start in the Middle East very shortly. THRUSH will be there to pick up the pieces. But even more important, we will soon control hundreds of key operatives within U.N.C.L.E. itself. Against that combination of factors, your organization cannot stand.”

Beladrac seized Illya’s chin and gave it a cruel, neck snapping twist. “Carry that little thought with you to your death, my friend.”

The deep-set eyes turned slightly mad, bright with the hatred Illya had seen many times before, the fanatic hatred which drove THRUSH on. Beladrac’s voice dropped to an insinuating croon.

“Of course it would be much simpler for me to shoot or stab or poison you. But since you eluded the little trap I set for you at the Rome airport, my anger has been piqued. I prefer to have you die in a somewhat more lingering way. Look here.”

The count stepped over to the bonnet of the Shelley-Python. He flicked the wires back to the cockpit.

“My little helpers have rigged this little device, which is a signal mechanism interconnecting the auto’s controls and the motor. The device will steer the car for a certain amount of time. Then it will fail. It will fail while the car is moving along at top speed on some of the deserted and precipitous back roads near here. How long the device will control the car

only my associates and I know. I *could* tell you. But that would spoil your trip. Be assured only that sometime when the car is operating at speed, all systems will go out. What happens then should be delightful, eh? And fitting, you arrogant U.N.C.L.E. swine! *Guilliame!"*

"Ready, Excellence," snapped one of the mechanics hovering by the cockpit.

Beladrac looked at his wrist watch. "Truss him up. The girl will be expecting me."

The mechanics swarmed around Illya. They cut his bonds. Illya punched hard at one of them the moment his hands came free. The mechanic cursed, reeled back. Another mechanic neck-chopped him. Illya's temples exploded with pain. He slid off the chair, was lifted bodily and hoisted over the Shelley-Python's bonnet.

The mechanics rolled him in the air like a rug. They placed him face down on the bonnet. They wrapped ropes around him, pinning his arms to his sides. His head stuck out past the headlamps. His ankles were lashed to either side of the windscreen.

"What a bizarre and amusing hood ornament you make, Kuryakin," the count chuckled.

"Like all the rest of your counterparts," Illya said wearily, "You're crazy."

"Am I? Personally, I feel this is quite an efficient means of dispensing with a car which I no longer want, and an agent who could hamper my affairs."

The mechanics stepped back. The one known as Guilliame called, "Ready, Excellence."

"Gentlemen," said Beladrac blithely, "start your engine."

One of the mechanics reached into the cockpit. A blasting roar filled the garage. The bonnet began to vibrate ferociously beneath Illya's belly.

Triple exhaust pipes on either side of the bonnet sprayed out hot gases that washed up against Illya's trussed hands. One of the mechanics sprang toward the concrete-block wall dead ahead of the car. The man pulled a toggle switch. There was a massive grinding of machinery. The central portion of the wall slid aside, revealing a steeply inclined macadam driveway leading into the darkness. In the distance, on a much lower level, lights in a city and a harbor twinkled, multi-colored. Illya figured that he'd never had such a depressing view of the Riviera before.

Carrying a small metal control box with three lighted dials, Count Beladrac stepped up alongside the bonnet of the Shelley-Python. The count threw the controls one after another. Illya heard the gears engage with a clash, felt the sports car strain forward, waiting for release.

The count's heavy thumb descended toward a red stud on the faceplate of the box.

"Enjoy your trip, Kuryakin. The car is programmed to negotiate all turns it encounters–until, of course, the mechanism fails. Will that be ten, five minutes from now? An hour? You will doubtless amuse yourself worrying and wondering."

And with a final sadistic laugh, the count hit the red stud.

FIVE

Like a bullet shot from a rifle, the Shelley-Python screamed out of the garage and hit the curve of the driveway, bearing left. Illya bounced on the bonnet, his midsection punished by terrific jarring concussions. But the ropes were tightly fastened. He didn't fly off.

The gears shifted automatically as the sports car veered left into a road which fronted a brightly-lit villa. The road angled steeply upward. There was a right turn ahead. Wind blasted Illya in the face. The road rushed at him. The Shelley-Python took the turn, sliding, starting to climb again.

The car went faster, screaming around the turns, bearing up into the deserted hills that overlooked the light-spangled harbor far below.

Illya's senses deadened with the impact of screaming wind. The programmed car negotiated a ninety-degree turn into another road and went howling down a level stretch flat out.

Illya knew that the machine must be doing at least one hundred by now. He could feel intense heat from the exhaust pipes on either side of the bonnet.

He pulled against his bonds. They gave only a little. And that was a risky business. If he fell off at this speed–

Growing numb, Illya watched the road unreel ahead, dark, flanked by low hills. The Shelley-Python took another right turn, sliding. It went flashing up an S-curve with a thunderous roar.

How long? Illya thought. Sweat formed on his forehead, dried instantly in the punishing wind. *How long before the smash?*

About thirty minutes after the Shelley-Python went roaring out of the driveway of the villa above Nice, a small, dusty Renault with its engine badly out of tune came puttering up the hill from the direction of the city.

The Renault's turn light flashed as it swung into the driveway entrance. The car passed a pair of towering pine trees which flanked the entrance. Somewhere an electrified gong rang clamorously three times.

The two men leaped out from behind the cover of the pine trees and into the path of the Renault. The driver applied the brakes at once. The guards carried machine pistols. Though dressed in nondescript clothing, they bore the all too-familiar tough and professional look of Thrushmen.

The first guard remained standing in the path of the headlights while the other tapped the window on the driver's side.

The driver rolled down the window. The guard snarled, "What's your business here?"

The man inside the car indicated a large wicker hamper on the seat. He said in smooth French, "I am from the wine shop in Nice. The count telephoned a special order a while ago."

Gesturing with his machine pistol, the guard said, "Open the hamper."

"Gladly, monsieur."

The driver was grateful for his Canadian upbringing. He'd heard and learned French almost as early as English. The hamper lid fell back, revealing several dusty bottles. The guard peered at the bottles for a moment, then shrugged.

Ahead, the driveway took a fork. One branch curved away past the front of the rambling three-storey pink stucco villa. This branch led to a basement garage whose outer door was closed. The right branch led straight back past the side of the villa to a side entrance where a light gleamed. It was to this right branch which the guard pointed with his gun barrel.

"That's the tradesman's entrance. Ring and someone will take the hamper."

The driver grinned obsequiously. "Of course. But I always go inside a moment. The count gives most generous tips."

The guard thought about that. "Five minutes, no more. We have our orders."

"Certainly, certainly," said Napoleon Solo in a craven tone. He engaged the shift and shot the little car forward down the drive.

Solo's nerves were tight-strung. This was a condition he hadn't expected. Five minutes! How could he get anywhere in that time?

Well, he'd simply have to take the chance, gamble that he could hide out long enough in the house to learn what was happening. He'd worry about the guards when they came after him. In a special pocket of his seedy jacket, the long-muzzled pistol rested reassuringly. The U.N.C.L.E. agent on station in Nice had met Solo at the airport and arranged for his disguise, which included cheap, thick-soled shoes and a Basque cap. The agent provided the car, the hamper, and the information that Count Lugo Beladrac did patronize a particular wine shop in the city. The shop utilized a car of the same make and color for delivery.

The count, of course, had ordered no wine. But subterfuge, no matter how risky, was necessary if he were to get inside the ostentatious villa and find out what had become of Elisabeth and Illya too, if he weren't already dead.

Following the road map provided, Solo had no difficulty finding the villa up in the hills. The difficult part began now.

He parked the Renault by the tradesmen's door, climbed out with the hamper. The night air was cool and pine-scented. The stars were high, sharp, bright. Solo rang the ancient bell-twist.

In a moment footsteps thudded inside. The door opened. A swarthy guard in a turtleneck sweater peered out.

"Delivery for Count Beladrac," Solo said in a whining voice, already half through the door. He was sure the guards down by the road would be watching.

He bumped past the swarthy man, who had a snubbed-nose automatic in his right hand. Solo shook the hamper. The bottles clinked faintly. "Wine for the count's dinner."

Beyond the guard, Solo glimpsed a stairway that went up to a closed door. To the left another stairway ran down to what appeared to be a cellar where a single light shone.

"I wasn't aware that the count had phoned down for any wine," the guard said.

"Yes, he did," Solo returned, setting the hamper on the floor. "Special Cordon Mare Red St. Thomas. Half a dozen bottles. Here, if you don't believe me."

Solo opened the hamper. He lifted one of the bottles and turned it as if to show the label. The butt of his left palm pressed the bottom of the opaque bottle. From the foil covered cork a needle-thin stream of nearly colorless vapor hissed, straight at the guard's nostrils.

The guard's strangled cry died in his throat. Solo caught the man with one hand as he fell, knocked out instantaneously. Quickly Solo pulled the man down the cellar stairs. He shoved him out of sight beneath them. Then he ran back up, listening.

He could hear nothing through the upper door which led into the villa proper. To go that way would risk instant discovery. He preferred to try another means, one which he'd used before to infiltrate older houses in Europe.

Clutching the hamper to his hip, he crept down into the cellar again. In a second room he found what he wanted, a metal monster of a gas heating plant, shut down, fortunately because the weather was not yet really chilly.

Back in the other room Solo located an old packing case. He stood on this, took out a knife from another pocket and began to pry at an access plate in one of the large, square hot air ducts running off into the darkness from the central furnace.

With a faint squeal of metal, one corner of the plate came loose. Solo listened, tense, breathing lightly. He was acutely conscious of time ticking away. The guards would be studying their watches down by the road.

Carefully he pried the other edges of the plate free. He lowered it to the floor. Then, testing the duct's weight-bearing capacity by hanging on to its edges and lifting his feet up from the packing case, he found that the duct work was strong enough to hold him. From past experience he'd expected it would be.

In another moment he climbed up inside the square duct. He wriggled his long-muzzled pistol free, holding this in his right hand. The sides of the duct pressed against his shoulders. But he was able to move along by maneuvering his knees and his elbows.

Solo worked his way ahead into the darkness. The duct angled upward. He strained, negotiating the rise with some difficulty. Finally he reached the next level above. Light leaked into the duct past the little upright bars of a discharge grille in the side of the duct a few feet ahead. Solo crawled forward, looked out.

The grille was part of the baseboard in a large, deserted kitchen with a stone floor and hearth. Savory cooking smells drifted to his nostrils. On a wooden table sat a variety of pots and pans and chafing dishes which indicated that someone had finished preparing a meal recently and departed. Ahead along the duct, light leaked in from grilles in other rooms on the main floor. Solo crawled that way.

Surprisingly, the next room he looked out into was a green-tiled chamber where a single lamp light illuminated some unusual furnishings: a dark surgical light in the ceiling; an operating table; consoles of sophisticated monitoring equipment; glass fronted instrument cases.

An operating theater built into the villa's main floor? It struck Solo as decidedly odd until he remembered what had started this whole sad affair –

Ffolkes-Pryce’s strange pale pink non-blood. Had he stumbled onto the technical center for the whole project?

Moving on down the duct carefully, Solo reached a point where the duct split. One branch ran right, another left. Little grilles let light from various rooms into each branch. From down the left one, voices drifted.

Solo’s heartbeat quickened. The palms of his hands slicked with cold sweat. He was certain he’d caught the tones of a man speaking, and then a woman.

He followed the sound of the voices. After only a few minutes in the duct, he was finding it more difficult to move cautiously. His knees and elbows hurt from pressing against the metal. He thrust his right shoulder forward, then shoved with his right elbow and knee. In that way he could move about six inches.

Repeating with the left shoulder, elbow and knee, he went another half a foot. But he was beginning to ache, and developing a slight case of claustrophobia with the metal pressing him on all sides.

He fought down the feeling and inched closer to the grille on his left, where light and the voices spilled in. He pulled up with his face close to the grille. He rolled his right shoulder under slightly, attempting to turn onto his side so that he could look out. In his left kneecap a cartilage popped. With an involuntary spasm his knee banged the side of the duct.

Solo stopped breathing as the thin metallic sound reverberated away. Fortunately for him, the two people in the room outside the duct were talking while it happened.

“Lugo darling, of course I want to be here with you. But I shouldn’t have come. I should be back in Rome.”

“Dearest, this conference or whatever it is that you must attend–it is not in session until Monday, am I not correct?”

“But I should be there anyway. I don’t know why I let you talk me into it, except that I do love you so very much. It’s been a whole new world, falling in love with you. And lately it seems so easy to take the path of least resistance.”

“Your work is taxing you. You deserve a holiday. Besides, I assure you that the travel case you were so concerned about is perfectly safe locked away in my vault. You saw how thick the walls are. Would I trust a flimsy vault with the heirlooms of the Beladrac family? Of course not!”

Of course not! Thought Napoleon Solo sourly as he watched the tender little scene transpiring in the large main dining room of the villa.

The grille opened into the baseboard of the long, narrow room which was lit here and there by funereal white tapers in old gold candelabra. The flickering light fell across ancient yellowed damask that covered the long table. Crystal and fine china gleamed. The remains of a sumptuous meal could be seen at the places set for the two diners.

A small fire glowed in a stone hearth directly behind Elisabeth d'Angelo. She looked heartbreakingly lovely. Her bare shoulders reflected the fire's orange gleam. She wore a low-cut strapless evening gown whose color and fit flattered her fine figure. Her sandy-gold hair caught the candle-gleams too. On her left hand, a brilliant over-sized diamond in a silver mounting flashed.

That, Solo remembered, hadn't been on her finger before. Then he wondered how much time had passed since he left the gate guards. Surely more than five minutes. And his leg was aching more, because of the cramped position in which he lay.

Solo felt the beginnings of a muscle spasm twitching deep within the flesh. He tried to correct his position, couldn't because of the cramped space. He peered out across the rich carpet at the coy dinner table scene.

Count Lugo Beladrac rose from his place opposite Elisabeth. The girl gave him a misty smile as he circled the end of the table and came to stand behind her. Beladrac looked oddly distinguished in his full set of tails and gleaming white shirt bosom. Despite his ugliness, the man had a certain hypnotic charm. Beladrac closed his massive left hand gently over her exposed shoulder. "Speaking of heirlooms, my dearest, does the ring please you?"

"Please me!" Elisabeth held the diamond up catch the candle light. "No girl could want a more beautiful ring."

Beladrac bent, pressed his lips to the gleaming crest of her hair. "And no ring could be more handsomely mounted than on your most beautiful of hands, *bellissima."*

Acute cynicism made Napoleon Solo want to retch. How *could* Elisabeth possibly fall for such verbal goo?

Elisabeth reached up to touch Beladrac's hand on her shoulder. In Solo's left leg, the internal spasm worsened. He was afraid his leg would start

twitching any moment. Elisabeth said: “Lugo, as soon as I discharge my duties at the Conference, can–can we be married?”

“I want you to be sure, Elisabeth sweetest.”

Elisabeth looked far from sure. She looked glassy-eyed, uncertain, and, now that he studied her more closely, totally worn out. “I am sure, darling. I have been sure for many days now–”

It was just then that the little scene changed from a parody of romance to something tinged with horror.

Lugo Beladrac disengaged his left hand gently from Elisabeth’s stroking fingers. He touched her throat, caressing it. Elisabeth shuddered, slumped forward, enjoying the touch.

Beladrac bent toward her across her shoulder. The front of his jacket belled away to reveal bright red satin lining. And Napoleon Solo saw that Lugo Beladrac was going to kiss Elisabeth d’Angelo’s white throat–

The count’s right hand came up around her bare shoulder from the other side. Elisabeth did not see. In that right hand the Count carried some sort of hypodermic, its barrel full of fluid, its needle split into a pair of sharp tips, like fangs–

Vampire! Thought Solo, just as a shout burst into the room.

Elisabeth’s eyes flew open. Startled, Beladrac thrust the double tipped needle downward. His angle was off, the needle buried itself in her shoulder instead of her neck.

Elisabeth shrieked feebly and clawed at it. A door Solo couldn’t see crashed open. He recognized the voice of one of the guards, shouting in Italian about a tradesman who had not come out of the house.

Face wrenching with rage and frustration, Beladrac drove the hypodermic plunger all the way to the bottom of the barrel with his thumb. Solo was struggling to get his pistol up into firing position against the grille. Elisabeth shuddered, pitched forward over the table, knocking a wine goblet off.

In the sudden silence, the goblet shattered. A second later, the muscle spasm in Solo’s left leg tore loose. His knee banged against the metal wall of the duct, a huge reverberating sound.

Beladrac’s satanic eyebrows hooked up. With a guard behind him, Beladrac charged toward the grille. Solo struggled to get his gun hand properly lined up for a shot. Beladrac skidded to a stop. He whipped out his

heavy gold filigree cigarette lighter and pointed it toward the grille. His thumb flicked against the side.

A high pressure stream of knockout gas ripped into the ventilator. Napoleon Solo coughed once. His head slumped. The pistol fell from his hands, hitting the metal of the duct with another clang that had all the odd finality of a funeral bell. Solo didn't hear it.

ACT III
DING, DONG, BELL-
SOLO'S IN THE WELL

The Shelley-Python screamed around another curve.

Lying on his belly on the bonnet with his jaw sticking out over the car's front end, Illya Kuryakin was hit in the face by a dazzle of light. Two immense headlamps filled the road ahead. The Shelley-Python didn't slacken speed, shooting at the big motor lorry like a projectile.

Over the scream of the wind Illya heard a cry of fright from the driver in the lorry's high, open cab. The unseen driver wrenched the wheel. The lorry careened into the ditch, spilling part of its load of cabbages. Two of them hit Illya on the back of the head like cannonballs as the automated sports car narrowly missed the lorry's right rear wheels and shot on.

Jolting, punishing, the bonnet crashed against Illya's belly again and again. He despaired of freeing himself from the racing death-machine, because if he parted the ropes by a sudden tug of strength–granting he could do it at all–he would be thrown off a vehicle hurtling along at well over one hundred miles an hour and he'd probably end up a gooey red paste on the roadside.

Still, the initial shock of being shot into the night on top of a mindless metal machine programmed to go out of control any moment had worn off a little. Illya found himself able to think a little more coherently. *Must be a way off this infernal machine. Must be!*

His view directly ahead was something akin to the sensations he'd once enjoyed on a roller-coaster at Coney Island. Enjoyed? He must have been out of his skull. There was nothing enjoyable in whizzing around hairpin curves, down short straightaways, up suddenly steep hills, never knowing whether the cracking up was right around the next bend. The Shelley-Python had missed the lorry, but what if a less skillful driver showed up?

Nice gleamed in a blurred pattern of lights visible now and then through breaks between the hills. Illya writhed uncomfortably. The bonnet was heating up.

A cherry glow at the corner of his eye caught his attention. He strained his head around. The wind battered at his right cheek like a ram. He saw that the exhaust pipes projecting from the left side of the bonnet were shining redly, super-heated by the continuous high-speed performance of the engine.

For one wild moment Illya stared at these red-hot exhaust pipes and tugged at the ropes which bound his left arm to his side. Could he do it? Did he dare even try?

A certain fatalistic professionalism well implanted in all U.N.C.L.E. agents took over, blanking out most of the intrinsic horror of his situation. Illya experimented with shifting his weight.

Although his bonds did not give greatly, he found he could move himself a short distance to the left, so that he lay precariously on the shoulder-slope of the bonnet. This placed his left wrist within a couple of inches of the rear-most of the three glowing exhaust pipes.

Breathing in great whooping gulps, Illya thrust his weight hard against his bonds. He felt himself slide ever so slightly down the bonnet's slope. The heat from the exhausts grew intense on his wrists. He wondered whether he'd be able to stand it.

Nonsense! Of course he must stand it. Napoleon Solo, his good friend and comrade, was probably dead back in the morgue in Rome. Therefore it behooved him to get off this devil's engine if possible, and go back to Beladrac's villa and take necessary steps to sabotage THRUSH's current plan. From the start he'd hated Beladrac's ugly, supercilious face. Fixing that face in his mind helped give him the strength he needed.

Illya could almost feel the adrenalin pumping, giving him the little extra impetus required to shift his weight so that his wrist-bonds jammed down against the hot exhaust.

A stink of rope fibers and flesh blew up briefly into his face. Then the wind whipped them away. Heat rose around his lower arm. Beginning to bring intense pain–

Illya shoved harder, pushing his roped wrist down on the pipe. The smell worsened. The pain was awful. He pressed harder–

Suddenly the rope sizzled through. Illya's downward pressure sent his hand hurtling free by the exhaust pipe. Wildly he dragged his arm back, just an instant before it touched the pavement whistling past underneath.

Illya hugged the hurting hand to his side, feeling it tremble and shake with the force of the exertion. If he'd so much as touched the road at this high speed, his hand would have been snapped off.

One hand free. How much time before the automatic controls failed? And he certainly couldn't free himself and just hop off the vehicle. He'd be jellied when he hit. That meant he had to find some means of hoisting himself back into the cockpit to where the brakes were located. Quite a challenge, with his legs lashed up and over the windscreen.

The Shelley-Python hit another grueling curve, went skidding through it. The road hugged the edge of a precipice on the left. The cliff dropped away sheer to darkness far below. The lights of Nice, its hotels and harbors, had receded a long way since he'd last glimpsed them. He was high up. The dizzying effect of the chasm on the left only intensified the intense precariousness of the situation.

Swallowing hard, Illya shifted his weight again so that his right wrist rested against a hot pipe on that side. More pain. Then those bonds frayed too. Now his whole torso was free.

The sports car seemed to be traveling along a relatively level stretch. Illya took he chance, starting to twist himself violently over on to his back.

Only a single rope lashed him back there, running from his ankles down over the windscreen into the cockpit. The rope twisted. He flopped onto his back and immediately began to slide off the bonnet. His hands went out instinctively, seized the nearest holds to keep himself from falling–

Screaming without thinking, Illya gripped the two exhaust pipes just long enough to give himself a violent push. He used all his strength to drive himself back to the sitting position. He caught the top edge of the windscreen, kicked hard so that the rope slid down to where it ran around the right side of the screen.

Illya stuck his legs around that way, felt his feet drop past the cockpit's edge into the cockpit proper. He got a firmer hold on the windscreen, even though the palms of his hands were raw, blistered. He said a little wordless prayer and gave a pull.

His whole middle body swung out into space over the side of the racing car. For one wild moment, he thought that he wouldn't be able to hang onto

the windscreen, that he'd fall backwards and hit his head like a ball on the racing pavement and have his brains dashed out–

But somehow he held fast, jerked his feet. And got his lower body down into the cramped cockpit. He crouched awkwardly there. He used his pain-laced finger to pry and tug and twist at the rope on his ankles. Dimly in the starlight he saw the spider-webbing of auto-control wires which Beladrac's mechanics had rigged. Illya was afraid to disturb them. Already he thought he heard a peculiar buzzing up where the wires disappeared in the dark beside the brake pedal.

Blood leaked down onto his fingers from his palms. It made working with the ropes difficult. At last he got the main knot unfastened. In a second he unlooped the rest of the strand, worked it down off his ankles.

The buzzing grew more pronounced. The Shelley-Python was still barreling along the straightaway beside the precipice. With difficulty Illya unbent his left leg. He stretched it forward into the leg space and felt for pedals. He found one, pressured it. But there was no response.

Must be the accelerator, probably over-ridden by the programmed controls. He shifted his foot to the left. Wind beat against his face over the windscreen. He contacted another pedal, touched it, felt the sensitive car respond. He sighted along the road ahead.

The straightaway continued along the precipice for at least another mile. He couldn't risk waiting. The buzzing increased. He hit the brake and gave the steering wheel a savage twist to the right. The Shelley-Python's tires smoked and howled. As the engine was forced into deceleration, the gearbox protested with a spit and grind. The car shot toward an embankment rising on the right side of the road.

How fast was he going? Fifty now? Forty? Illya couldn't tell. The bonnet reached the hill-slope, tilted up. Illya flew backwards, grabbing at air. He kicked free of the cockpit, went spinning. He came down with a massive, bone-wrecking thud that knocked him half unconscious. His single salvation had been landing on the hill's heavy turf.

Suddenly from under the bonnet of the car came a skyrocketing of greenish sparks. The Shelley-Python caromed off the side of the hill and bounced back toward the roadway. The motor noise stopped suddenly.

Silently, eerily, the racing car hit the pavement and lifted off, its tires leaving smoke-trails behind. It shot over the edge of the precipice like a missile, arching out and out silently until it lost velocity and began to fall.

The thick grass against Illya's palms hurt unmercifully. Abruptly, like the mutter of a thunderstorm, the car struck somewhere down at the bottom of the cliff. A geyser of light, molten-red, climbed into the sky and recede.

Illya's whole body felt crushed, battered. He rolled over onto his stomach so that his palms would not touch the ground.

Beladrac, he thought. *Beladrac's villa.*

Must get up. Go back there.

Assignment.

Job to do. Got to get back there and see what–

The stars pulsed bright, then dimmed. If he was going back to Beladrac's villa, it would have to be later. Illya knew he was going to black out.

In a second more, it happened.

TWO

Darkness. Thick. Stifling. Tinged with dampness. Napoleon Solo woke in it, terrified.

Every instinct recoiled and rebelled against the unclean, subterranean odor of that dark. He thrust his hands out in front of him, wiggling his fingers, hoping to touch something that would give him a sense of orientation. A strangled shout worked up into his throat–

All at once, like a relay switch being thrown, reason took over. Solo remembered what had happened. He drew his hands back to his sides, embarrassed at the way his sudden wakening in the muffling dark had started his heart hammering and his mind careening on a panic course.

Find out where you are.

The ancient, primitive fear of the dark receded a little. Solo realized he was sitting on a rough, hard floor, propped up against a similar type of wall. He felt on both sides of his legs. His fingertips found the indentations of worn mortar between bricks. Then they brushed across the faintly wet surfaces of the bricks themselves.

Reaching behind his head, he discovered that the wall he leaned against was likewise made of brick. Solo scrambled to his feet. His shoes made an odd, hollow clacking sound, raising faint echoes. This further confirmed his suspicions that he was imprisoned somewhere underground.

Where? In Beladrac's villa? Probably. But there was no way of telling for certain.

Cautiously Solo worked his way around the curve of the wall. After he had continued this for a minute or so, he stopped. He turned, faced the center of his cell, started walking in that direction.

Eight long strides brought him up against the curved wall on the opposite side. He was inside some lightless underground prison-cell in the shape of a cylinder.

Once more he began a circuit of the wall, feeling carefully, feeling high and low. When enough time had elapsed so that he was certain he'd gone at least once around the circumference, he gave up. He leaned back, letting a little sibilant breath of exasperation slip out.

As far as he could tell, there were no doors anywhere in the brick. Quickly he searched through his clothing. Beladrac had removed everything, including his pocket communicator. So no help was to be had in that direction. And his special shoes with the tiny compartments that held various powerful gas and explosive capsules had been taken too.

Now a new kind of terror began to gnaw at Napoleon Solo's mind. Not formless terror; clearly defined. He knew the limits of his prison. He didn't like them one bit. How high was the ceiling?

By way of experiment, he tried climbing the part of the wall nearest him. The grooves in which the mortar lay were not deep enough to provide finger-holds. He fell once, twice, three times before giving up.

Solo wished he had a cigarette. He wondered what had become of Elisabeth. Was she alive, having taken that nasty pronged needle in her neck? Had Beladrac gone? Elisabeth too? Unfortunately the period from the gas attack in the air shaft until he wakened here was a total loss.

He didn't feel too badly, all things considered. A slight touch of nausea, a mild headache. Nothing at all to worry about–*if* he had a fighting chance of getting out of this peculiar circular dungeon.

Pondering the problem, he was startled by a sudden rasp of sound overhead. Light washed down into the cylinder. A huge stone cap that topped the cylinder had been removed; Solo saw two of Beladrac's Thrushmen laboring to shift it all the way to one side.

The round opening was a good twenty feet above Solo's head. There seemed to be additional space above that, as though the mouth of the cylinder was part of a floor; higher than the mouth itself, Solo glimpsed a ceiling, a dim light bulb burning.

All at once Count Lugo Beladrac's ugly face popped over the lip of the top. His hand appeared, carrying a huge electric torch which he snapped on. Wincing from the light, Solo recoiled against the wall. Beladrac crouched beside the mouth of the brick cylinder-cell, moving the light so that Solo was finally caught in the middle of it.

"Now, now, Solo," Beladrac called, his voice bouncing and echoing around the circular brick wall. "Mustn't be reticent. After all, there's no place to hide in my little oubliette."

Oubliette. That was the word for which Solo had been searching. An oubliette was a special type of underground dungeon, usually secret. Many

old homes throughout Europe had them, dating to the time when political prisoners were kept penned up until they conveniently died.

Solo had never seen an oubliette before, though he decided now that he could have skipped the novelty altogether. “How long have I been down here?” He had a tendency to shout until he discovered that the oubliette acted as a kind of sound-chamber, carrying his speech upward quite clearly when he spoke in a normal tone.

“The better part of three hours,” said the count.

“Is this supposed to soften me up?”

“Not particularly,” answered the count with a shrug. “No doubt it will, though.”

“And I doubt that very much,” Solo said, with much more bravado than he actually felt.

Count Beladrac clucked his tongue and flashed his huge white smile that distorted his ugly face into a grotesque mask. “Mr. Solo, I believe you are laboring under a false assumption. I seem to detect a conviction that I have put you down there for psychological reasons. A little preparation for torture, let’s say? Nothing could be further from the truth. I have no intention of seeing you again after this stone cap is rolled back into place.

“I do wish I had time to subject you to some slightly more creative and painful mode of death. Unfortunately I have an important mission to carry out. I can’t let personal whims stand in its way, even though I could think of nothing more delightful than watching you die second by second and bit by bit.”

Again the continental shrug. “Ah, well. My loss of pleasure is minor, especially now that THRUSH is on the threshold of final victory. It will begin with war in the Middle East, and will end with the globe in chaos, nation against nation. The free world’s so-called defenders, the U.N.C.L.E., will be torn by strife and treason from within. You see, Mr. Solo, we now have the means to bring members of you organization under our direct control. Our goal is to take over five hundred agents in five months.

“Five hundred–” Solo exploded.

“Certainly. We have at least eighty under–ah–treatment already. That is, they have received, quite unknown to themselves, of course, the first inoculations which produce initial symptoms of lassitude. Their slumber becomes so deep at night, it is quite easy for our people to gain entrance to

their homes and begin the transference operations while the victims snore on blissfully. They never feel a thing, and never waken."

Solo's mind boggled. "You break in and *operate* on U.N.C.L.E. agents?"

"But of course. The first treatment is usually applied with a needle accidentally scraped or scratched against the victim's hand or cheek in the guise of some simple accident. It renders the victim into a state of virtual hypnosis for precisely six nights. Sometime during that period, one of our surgical teams breaks in and effects the first transfer."

"Of blood." Solo's face was stark in the flash's glare. "That's what it's all about."

"How brilliant of you. I assume you learned this when you got hold of the corpse of Ffolkes-Pryce?" the count said.

"You're nothing but a damn bloody bunch of vampires–"

"Let's not become hysterical, Mr. Solo. Vampires we decidedly are not. Our procedure is highly scientific. The THRUSH Central research laboratories have spent years developing the serum with which we replace the normal blood of our–ah–takeovers, as we call them."

Remembering, Solo saw thin, pinkish, transparent fluid. "Three compounds of the hydrobrionic alkaline class. Drugs that make a person lose his will–"

"Four compounds," corrected Beladrac, "But yes, the effect is as you describe."

"When does it happen?"

"It happens gradually. We are able to assume a certain degree of psychological control from the very first transference, or operation, or transfusion, if you prefer that word. The takeover becomes more suggestible due to extreme fatigue. You saw how your little girl friend was behaving? She has received the third transfer. Only the fourth remains, which I had intended to see to this weekend. We have a complete operating theater here in the villa, you know."

Solo said nothing, but he remembered the surgical lights, consoles, the operating table he'd seen while crawling through the grille.

The count went on: "Elisabeth, the poor pathetic little mouse, has had seventy-five per cent of her blood replaced with our special serum. I drugged her at dinner just before you were discovered because I thought our technicians here would want to perform the operation. Now it turns out, it's

their opinion that she is already almost totally under our control. The last transfer in unnecessary before I return her to Rome."

Beladrac's bushy brows quirked as he nodded. "Elisabeth is one of our most important takeovers, due to the delicate and highly important role she will play at the Mid-Eastern Peace Conference. Indeed, THRUSH Central felt so strongly about the importance of this phase of the plan that I was instructed to break my cover and personally supervise her activities. Thus our little charade, including the meeting at the sports car rally in America. Really, she's a frightfully drab little creature. Nothing like the splendid wenches with whom I usually consort.

So choked with rage and frustration was Napoleon Solo, he couldn't even speak.

"Ah! Delighted to see I penetrated under your skin at last!" Beladrac called breezily. "I did want to step down here and reinforce the point, Solo. You have failed miserably."

Solo already had unpleasant suspicions to that effect. Stalling for time, he said: "Tell me about this serum you exchange with human blood. How can a human being live on it?"

Beladrac waved with the torch. Its beam jittered crazily over the damp bricks of the oubliette, making ghostly shadows.

"Oh, naturally, one can't for very long. Our laboratories place the maximum survival time for one hundred per cent takeovers at nine to twelve months following the last transfer. Nothing is left in the bloodstream to fight bodily infection. The victim simply succumbs.

"We knew that when we started, of course, which explains why we are on such a precise timetable. We must have all our takeovers inoculated within five months. That will give us another four months, approximately, to destroy U.N.C.L.E. from within."

Seeing the hellish sincerity of the man, Solo had no choice but to believe him. Mr. Waverly's reports of defections already confirmed that the TRUSH plan was working. What would happen when the supra-nation had a bigger cadre of agents in its power, a cadre five hundred strong?

Such a force could wreck U.N.C.L.E.'s entire operation, disclose its secrets and bring the whole edifice tumbling down in a confusion of fear and betrayal.

Something else sprang into Solo's mind. He said two words: "The war–"

“The war I mentioned? In the Middle East? It will serve as the backdrop for our grand plan. Serve to keep U.N.C.L.E. busy, for one thing, while we bore from within.

“*Signorina* d’Angelo will see that war breaks out, right enough. She won’t present her evidence of THRUSH activity to the peace conference on Monday. By the way, I already know about the contents of her little travel case in which I’ve pretended total disinterest. To continue–on Monday she will accuse one of the two nations involved in the dispute. She will in effect place the entire weight and prestige of U.N.C.L.E. behind her accusation. You can imagine what will happen.”

Indeed Solo could. The conference would break up completely. War would burst and bloom south of the Mediterranean. And with U.N.C.L.E. thus occupied, THRUSH could maneuver the agents it had taken over. THRUSH would probably begin with sabotage of the U.N.C.L.E. communications network, and advance to assassination of all the executives in Section I. Solo turned absolutely cold at the thought. And somehow he was certain that Count Lugo Beladrac was not making any of it up. “Where’s Elisabeth right now?” Solo asked.

“Preparing to leave for Rome. We’re motoring there. Since the technicians assured me she does not really need the final transfer of serum, we shall go tonight.”

“But she was awake when you stabbed that needle into her! She saw you!”

Count Beladrac stood up, towering against the dim ceiling light far above. “Indeed she did. We gave her a booster injection before she regained consciousness, however. The booster exercises a synergistic effect upon the serum. It added just enough of an extra touch of dullness to her mind so that she was unable to recall exactly what happened at the dinner table.”

Beladrac smiled his white, arrogant smile. “I’m sure that I shall be able to talk my way around it. I have never met a woman I could nor persuade. And, as you know, Elisabeth is very fond of me.”

He leered down a moment, obscenely pleased with himself. Then he shrugged again. “The girl may have one or two unpleasant memories which she won’t be able to explain away. But she will do what we want.”

The count passed his big flash to one of the guards hovering behind him. Then he dusted his hands together elaborately.

“I did want you to have a little information on which to speculate before you died, Solo. It should hearten you, knowing that you are unable to stop THRUSH this time. Do you have any further questions?”

“No,” said Napoleon Solo. “But I’m going to kill you, ugly man.”

“Oh? When do you propose to do that?”

“There’ll come a time. I’ll do it for what you’ve done to her.”

Wrinkling his nose, Beladrac said, “Your taste is abominable. She’s pretty, but cheap.”

Solo leaped at the brick wall. His nails dug into the mortar grooves. One thumbnail split down the middle, bringing excruciating pain. For a moment he hung on the bricks, poised like a monkey, as though he might race straight up the wall. Then he lost momentum. Gravity clutched him. He fell down to the brick floor.

“You Americans are so nauseatingly physical about everything,” Beladrac sighed. “Well, I must leave you. As soon as the stone is rolled over, one of my lads will fill the oubliette with water. In that water will be a particularly fast-acting virus. It has a most unpleasant effect upon the mucous membranes of the body. You won’t be able to keep from swallowing some of the water eventually. The moment you do, a swift cycle will begin–a complete disease cycle, from infection to death, in less than ten minutes.

Count Beladrac raised his right hand in jaunty salute. “And might I remind you that men and women in this world tend to overlook a man’s ugliness so long as that man *wins.* THRUSH will win and so will I. *Au revoir.”* Another wave, and he vanished.

The black disc of the stone cover thrust out over the opening at the top. Like an eclipse, it slowly pushed away all of the light from the dim ceiling bulb. Last the stone chunked into place.

Solo pricked his ears. He heard a gurgling, a bubbling. Then, with a faint hum of high-speed pumps for counterpoint, there was a wet rushing. The water swirled up from the small floor gratings he hadn’t spotted before. Wild thoughts flashed in his mind. He saw images of Beladrac’s hideous face; Elisabeth nodding and drowsing.

He imagined her denouncing one of the parties at the conference table in the name of U.N.C.L.E. He saw tanks rumbling; cannons belching; jet fighters diving over the desert near Suez. He saw the war headlines; the spreading international chaos.

And he had a frighteningly grim mental picture, at the last, of some trusted U.N.C.L.E. operative coming in to confer with Mr. Alexander Waverly.

As Waverly talked about the growing defections in U.N.C.L.E.‘s ranks, this nameless, faceless man, taken over bodily by THRUSH, drew a gun, aimed it at Waverly’s head, pulled the trigger. A splatter of blood, spreading, spreading–

No panic! Solo thought. *It’s* bad *but it’s not that bad.*

Though indeed it was. The water was already up to his ankles. It wasn’t chilly. Rather it was lukewarm, and tinged with a peculiar moldy smell. Infected? Yes. He dared not take any of it in, not a drop.

It took all of Napoleon Solo’s carefully developed will power to stand perfectly still until the water reached the level of his neck. Then, holding his mouth shut tight, he began to tread water. The buffeting of the water within the oubliette was gentle at the surface, even though the water churned violently where it was being pumped in at the floor.

At the end of fifteen minutes Solo had floated far enough up in the brick cylinder so that he could reach over his head and shove at the stone cap. He pushed with all his strength while his legs kept threshing to keep him afloat.

The stone gave a fraction. A hairline of light showed, perhaps an inch wide. But try as he might, Solo couldn’t move the stone any further. The water bore him higher. He kept his mouth closed. He was being slowly jammed up against the under-surface of the stone. He’d be swallowing water soon.

Somewhere far away, gunshots rang out. Wildly, desperately, Solo began to yell. He called for help as the germ-laden water lapped and splashed over his chin, dribbled off his cheeks. He yelled and yelled, lungs hurting, legs aching, wondering whether help was out there–and if they’d hear him in time.

Three

From a boulder to one side of the dark road, Illya Kuryakin surveyed the villa.

About a hundred yards ahead down the road’s shoulder, a driveway branched off to the right. Beyond it Illya saw a high tile-roofed house in the starlight. Not many windows were lighted at this hour of the evening. The place had a deserted look. But it was the house he wanted, right enough.

When he wakened back up in the hills after the harrowing ride on the robot-controlled sports car, he'd started trudging down the road in the general direction of Nice. He'd planned to go all the way down into town, phone the nearest U.N.C.L.E. station and ask directions. Before he had gone very far a vegetable farmer on his way home late from market stopped his truck on the road in response to Illya's wave.

Yes, the driver knew the location of Count Beladrac's villa. All in the district knew its whereabouts. Wasn't the count a renowned ladies man, not to mention a sportsman? Illya was instructed to take a certain turn of the road, then after another kilometer, look for the two towering pine trees which flanked the driveway's entrance. These Illya saw now, dark silver cones against the sky.

He felt wretched. He looked equally bad. Fortunately the darkness had hidden much of the damage–facial bruises, gashes crusted over, blood dried, and the awful burns on his hands–from the trucker. Illya was certain that if the man had seen him full face, he would have driven off with a shudder after crossing himself.

Illya had torn strips of his jacket lining to bind around his wrists where the exhaust pipes had seared. The cloth chafed, itched, caused excruciating pain each time a fold of the silk rubbed a raw spot. He couldn't think about that now, though. His responsibility was to get inside that villa, discover what happened to the count and Elisabeth.

To his right across the road, Illya noticed a shoulder of land which led down toward the count's property. Some thin weeds filled it. Illya crept from cover, crossed the road and slipped among the trees.

He worked his way straight ahead. The path he was blazing would bring him out right onto a little bluff which dropped down onto the count's property, well back of the road and pine trees. As he moved along he had occasional flashes of dizziness. Once he had to stop and lean against a beech tree until things stopped spinning.

In a few more minutes he navigated his way to the trees nearest the little bluff. From this vantage point he could see the side of the villa, including a tradesman's entrance with a single light burning above it. Further back was a triple garage. All three overhead doors were raised. No autos stood in the dark bays.

A sense of dismay struck him. The Rolls-Royce gone? Had Beladrac left? If so, where was he going? Then Illya wondered about the advisability

of trying to penetrate the villa at all. He might be asking for more trouble if the mechanics were still on the premises.

He thought of Elisabeth d'Angelo. She was his responsibility. The absence of the Rolls didn't guarantee that she had left too. It was his duty to make certain one way or another. He only wished that he had a weapon. He slid from behind the tree trunk, approached the sloping little bluff and jumped. Trouble came while he was still in the air.

From his left a man shouted, "*Hold!*" in French. A machine pistol rattled. Illya felt something whistle by, unpleasantly close. He struck the ground and rolled. He let out a cry and flopped over onto his face. He lay unmoving.

The two men emerged from their hiding places behind the large pine trees near the road. As they advanced, their machine pistols glittered in the faint glow of the stars. They talked to one another in muffled French. They halted about six feet from where Illya lay.

Neither said a word for the better part of a minute. Then one spoke to the other: "All right. He must be down. Let us see who he is."

Illya closed both hands like claws on the wrist of the one who reached down and grabbed his shoulder. The man swore. Illya twisted on to his shoulder blades and drove his right leg up into the man's midsection. The moment Illya's feet hit, he wrenched at the man's machine pistol and jerked it loose. Startled, the other guard recovered quickly. He twisted around to his right to get a clear shot. Illya pushed the first guard out of the way, decided to worry about the pistol's noise later, squeezed the trigger.

A stutter of sound ripped toward the second guard, caught him in the belly just as his own hand was constricting to fire. The man went "gaugh" deep in his throat and keeled over backwards.

Illya immediately turned his attention to the other guard. The man was floundering on all fours. Bullets weren't necessary on him. Illya merely reversed his weapon and rapped the guard twice on the bulge at the back of the skull.

The man relaxed peacefully into the mixture of pine needles and dried grass that covered the ground. He snored. Illya turned the man's head so that the sound was muffled. He clambered to his feet–

Just as the click of a latch sounded behind him.

Spinning, Illya saw a third guard open the tradesman's door and peer out, a swarthy man in a turtleneck sweater. The man spotted Illya and

whipped up his snub-nosed automatic. Illya's eyes were blurred. He still hadn't recovered from the awful physical and emotional shock of the ride on the Shelley-Python. He fired. The shots missed, chipping wood from the door-frame. The guard fired back. He missed because Illya went stumbling away to the right. Illya shot again.

The guard did a peculiar kind of shuffle with his feet and swayed forward through the opening. He dropped his automatic as he fell. Blood ran in a black line down his right temple.

The man's blind, dying hands grabbed wildly at space, caught the bell-twist on the outside of the door, gave it a savage turn as he fell–

Deep inside the villa, the bell rang loudly.

FOUR

Caught there in the open with the light from the tradesman's entrance flooding over him, Illya had a wild impulse to run. He was exhausted. His whole body ached. He fought to keep from fainting. The guard in the turtleneck was sprawled out on the doorsill, stone-stiff. The echoes of the bell reverberated–

Panting, Illya ran back to the little buff. He scrambled up into the trees and flopped down. The side door of the villa remained open. No one else appeared.

A night bird chirruped back in the woods. High in the sky an airliner with red and green lights flashing rumbled west along the Riviera. Illya realized finally that the command post had been abandoned. And just within the last few hours, at that.

Where had Beladrac gone? Illya wondered. Had he surrendered Elisabeth and then returned to Rome? No, that hardly made sense. Illya was so fatigued, so dazed, that the thought of searching the villa room by room exhausted him. Was there really any need to go inside? He didn't see why. The evidence was clear. The place had been abandoned.

Illya climbed down the bluff again. He started toward the big pine trees in a limping walk. Then professionalism got the better of him. He turned back. He limped into the villa through the tradesman's entrance. He started up a short staircase which evidently led to the main part of the house. His hand was slippery with sweat as he gripped the rail.

Ah, he thought wearily, *I should skip the whole thing. They've gone. It's fruitless to search.*

That was the moment when he heard the sound of a human voice from somewhere in the cellar, a man's voice, hoarsely crying out for help. Had his imagination tricked him? Illya listened hard. The cry came again. He plunged down the cellar steps in a stumbling run.

ACT IV
THE NIGHT OF THE VAMPIRE

"And to think," said Napoleon Solo, "That you almost neglected your professional duty!"

“But Napoleon,” Illya protested, “how was I supposed to know that my professional duty included saving you? To all intents and purposes Beladrac’s house was empty.”

“Good lord, what kind of an excuse is that? Think of all you might have overlooked! The operating theater, for one thing–”

“And you, inside the oubliette, of course. You remind me of it constantly.”

“Well, it was my hide in the soup. Another two minutes and I’d have swallowed a couple of quarts of that germ culture and that would have been it.”

“I very nearly didn’t have strength to move the stone cap,” Illya said.

“That’s obvious,” Solo bantered back. “I did most of the work from underneath.”

“I was half dead on my feet. I wanted to get back to Nice and check in. I think Mr. Waverly would have accepted that explanation.”

“But I wouldn’t have.”

“How could you? You’d have been dead, I believe.” He grinned.

They’d been arguing that way, on and off, most of this long droning Monday, ever since they first took up their positions in a couple of comfortable chairs behind a folding screen on the balcony overlooking the salon of the Hotel Penti in Rome.

Solo felt guilty about idling around in such comparative luxury, courtesy of the hotel management whom he browbeaten via a phone call from Waverly. The management had smuggled them onto the balcony overlooking the large horseshoe conference table under the great chandeliers in the glittering hall. This wasn’t exactly the toughest duty, simply sitting and waiting for Elisabeth d’Angelo to appear for her scheduled part on the program.

Yet the enforced idleness, the luxurious surroundings, the feel of a good sharkskin suit against Solo’s arms and legs, only emphasized, somehow, the tremendous things at stake.

After the rescue from the oubliette, the agents had contacted the U.N.C.L.E. man on station in Nice by phone from the villa. An ambulance came. Illya was given medical attention, his wrists and palms treated and bandaged. The bandages showed white at the edge of Illya’s dark blazer cuffs now.

Solo had contacted Waverly from the villa. Within a few hours a team of U.N.C.L.E. search experts arrived in Nice via chartered plane. Presumably the team was still going over the villa, ripping the operating theater apart and hunting all over the house for concealed records and files.

Count Lugo Beladrac would have gotten a bit of surprise if he had returned. But he never did. Perhaps one of his henchmen had come back, seen the official cars all around the place, fled and gotten in touch with Beladrac somewhere. At any rate, Beladrac had probably chalked the villa off as a tactical loss; he had left, confident that both Illya and Solo were out of action.

And he had his most important asset with him, anyway, wherever he was, Elisabeth.

Beladrac had vanished. More U.N.C.L.E. agents, flown in from Bonn, Paris, London, were combing Rome now. But thus far no positive reports had come in.

Napoleon Solo slouched deeper into the chair, fanned back his cuff. The hands of his watch stood almost at ten to four. Elisabeth was scheduled to present the U.N.C.L.E. evidence at four sharp. If she didn't show, they would have a real crisis on their hands. The delegates on the two sides of the great table in the hall below hadn't been doing so well today, even after taking the weekend to cool off.

And if Elisabeth did show, Solo was prepared for an even worse crisis. Her presence would mean that she was still in THRUSH's control.

"–and so I say to the delegates that no proof has been forthcoming at this conference table of the good intentions of the other party concerned. Rather, we came face to face again with the evidence presented by the intelligence officers of our own country, evidence which indicates that those who now come here pretending good faith are actually as ravening wolves in the fold–disguised. Bent upon sinking the fangs of their imperialism into the throat of my country, the Shaikhdom of–"

In singsong English the speaker droned on. He was robust, middle-aged man wearing white robes and a flowing white burnous. He spoke from a raised podium at the closed end of the horseshoe table. The plenary session of the Mid-Eastern Peace Conference numbered perhaps fifty. About twenty were from each of the countries concerned. The rest were diplomats from neutral nations who were attempting to keep the negotiations on the track. The representatives of the Shaikhdom were launched upon a tirade,

vilifying those from the other country. The accused, hook-nosed men in Westernized morning coats, looked and listened with stiff fury. The companions of the delegate in the burnous applauded at various points during his harangue. One of them went so far as to exclaim, “Hear, hear!” in a precise Etonian accent.

The delegate in the burnous grew louder, his voice actually shaking the public address system. His arm-waving image was multiplied a dozen, two dozen times by the mirrors on the walls of the Gran Saloon. His voice reached a climax:

“–and therefore we refuse to insult our intelligence further by listening to the petty subterfuges of the delegates seated opposite us at this table!”

“One moment, one moment!” cried the conference chairman, a Swede. He leaped up to seize the microphone. “We cannot allow such accusations! They violate the spirit of this–”

A delegate in morning coat from the opposite side was on his feet, shaking his fist. “And we’ll listen to no more! We have tried to negotiate in good faith, but–”

His voice was drowned under a storm of shouts and boos from the opposite side, plus shouts of approval from his fellows. Illya rubbed his nose, looking depressed. “Sound the bugles. Advance the colors. To arms! Let the war begin!”

Solo was about to reply when he heard a faint *beepa-beepa* from an inner pocket. He whipped out his communicator, adjusted the calibrations. “Channel B open. Solo here.”

A voice crackled faintly against the background of shouts and oaths from the floor of the conference hall. “Gunther, outside the hotel. She’s arrived. In the Rolls-Royce.”

“Is Beladrac with her?”

“No. A chauffer dropped her off and parked the car in the hotel lot. She’s already in the lobby.”

“What about the little travel case?” Solo asked. “Does she have it with her?”

“No, she’s carrying nothing except her handbag and a file folder of papers.”

“Stay in position,” Solo ordered. “I’ll call if we need you.” He switched off the communicator, thrust it back in his pocket, his face pale with worry.

“You heard it, Illya. She hasn’t got the tapes or the microfilm records. That means the count has ‘em, and she’s still operating under his control.”

Solo’s mind worked swiftly, rolling with the terrible new contingencies of the situation.

“We can’t let her get to that microphone. If she’d brought the travel case, we’d know she at least had the evidence. We could get her out of the way and present it ourselves. But that file folder probably contains a prepared speech the Count’s ghosted for her. I suggest we get down there on the floor, take the chairman aside and tell him he can’t let Elisabeth speak. Otherwise–”

Illya had turned ashen. “I think it’s too late for that, Napoleon. Listen.”

Solo edged toward the screen, shoved it aside so that he could look out onto the great floor of the conference room. He saw the delegates in their burnouses craning their heads toward the rear of the hall. Their opposite numbers in morning coats did the same, along with all the diplomats from the neutral countries.

The Swedish chairman was at the podium, having displaced the fiery orator. He was attempting to inject some measure of calm into the proceedings by talking in a firm quiet voice:

“–and I ask you to direct your attention to the rear of the hall, gentlemen, so that I may introduce the young lady who is scheduled to speak at this hour. Her name is Miss d’Angelo. She carries some important documentary evidence which it is imperative that she present to this conference. We are of the opinion that her evidence will show conclusively that the disastrous international incidents which have brought us all to this table are not the work of terrorists employed by either government represented here. Rather, they are the work of a third party–the supra-nation which styles itself with the code name THRUSH.”

Faces paled at the horseshoe table. There was a murmur of whispering. The Swede went on smoothly: “–we hope to demonstrate that THRUSH has been exploiting all those of us concerned with world peace, and exploiting your two governments most specifically, to serve its own ends.” The chairman unfolded a yellow sheet. “Before I present Miss d’Angelo formally, I wish to read this cable.”

Listening, Solo strained for a glimpse of Elisabeth. But she was evidently standing far back beneath the balcony at the rear of the room.

“The cable says, *This is to inform the delegates to the Mid-Eastern Peace Conference that Miss Elisabeth d’Angelo is our authorized representative, that she presents her evidence with our complete approval, and that her findings are fully validated and endorsed by this organization. Signed A. Waverly, Policy and Operations, United Network Command for Law and Enforcement*.”

Stunned silence gripped the conference table a moment. Then excited talk broke out, even louder than before. The chairman rapped his gavel once, twice, three times.

“Gentlemen. Gentlemen! Time is rushing. Miss d’Angelo, if you please?”

Smartly dressed in a tweed suit, Elisabeth walked out from beneath the balcony. She was white-cheeked. Her expression was dazed, foggy, uncertain.

“Let’s get her out of here,” Solo growled, already moving.

He thrust the screen aside, headed for the balcony rail. Illya was right behind him.

The conference chairman boomed on the microphone, “Miss d’Angelo, are you quite all right?”

Elisabeth passed a hand across her eyes. Her speech was labored, but her voice carried despite the lack of a microphone. The delegates all turned toward her as she moved down one side of the great horseshoe table, speaking as she took step after uncertain step:

“Yes, Mr. Chairman, thank you. But–I’m afraid the evidence which I have for you–”

At the balcony rail, Solo checked. He gripped the rail with hands whose knuckles had turned white. He wanted to hear this, wanted to be absolutely sure.

Illya stopped beside him. Though the two U.N.C.L.E. agents were quite visible now, no one below noticed them, so intent were all the delegates on Elisabeth.

As though some power stronger than her own will were forcing the words out of her, she continued: “–the evidence gathered by the United Command for Law and Enforcement, does not support our original conclusion that–THRUSH has been causing the trouble in the Middle East. No. Mr. Chairman, we now have new facts to indicate–”

Elisabeth kept walking, up past the side of the conference table behind the delegates in bournouses who screwed around in their plush chairs to watch her.

"–new facts to indicate that *all* of the incidents are the work of terrorists employed by the government of just one of the nations whose delegates are seated–"

Solo vaulted over the balcony rail and dropped the ten feet to the carpet inside the U of the table.

He landed with a jolt. Perfect coordination kept him on his feet. He flipped back the lapel of his jacket, whipped out the long-muzzle pistol even as he jumped up on the table and leaped off the other side. In a second he'd slipped behind Elisabeth, grabbed her elbow and was pulling her toward the main entrance of the great hall.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," he said with a tense, wolfish smile," but we're relieving Miss d'Angelo of her authority to speak for U.N.C.L.E."

Elisabeth began to struggle. "Take your filthy hands off me!" She swung a gloved hand at Solo's head. Her eyes were glassy. She didn't recognize him. "I will speak! I have orders–"

"From the wrong side," Solo whispered, pulling her steadily toward the door.

Illya had landed nearer the door after jumping from the balcony. Gun drawn, he saw Napoleon approaching with his struggling captive, wrenched the doors open. Startled, the pair of security guards stationed outside swung around.

One spotted Illya's pistol, pulled out his own walnut swagger stick. Illya muttered an apology and whacked the man across the back of the head with the butt of his gun. Illya caught the man as he fell, shoved him into the other guard who was charging forward. Solo had nearly reached the door. His arm was around Elisabeth's waist now. She was kicking at his shins, caterwauling, screaming, "No! Let go of me! They'll kill me!" Tears ran down her cheeks.

"Elisabeth, stop it!" Solo cracked out. "You're safe. Don't you recognize me? Napoleon–"

"I don't know you! Let me go! They'll kill me if I don't speak!"

Emotionally torn by the anguish in her cry, Solo had a tough time bringing himself to manhandle her. But it was necessary. She was scratching at him with her nails, ripping his cheeks.

“Hurry!” Illya called from the doors, alternately watching Solo and the interior of the vast Hotel Penti lobby where guests and hotel staff turned to stare in puzzlement and then alarm.

Deftly Solo jabbed the index finger of his free hand against a nerve control center beneath Elisabeth’s right ear. Her protests stopped. All the stiffness went out of her body.

As she sagged Solo caught her like a meal-sack. He slung her over his shoulder and turned to run, just as Illya spotted a flurry of activity out by the triple bank of revolving doors on the lobby’s far side.

“Someone’s coming in the main door, Napoleon. I think I see one of our people trying to–”

A shot rang out. One of the revolving doors spun rapidly. A man caught inside pitched into the lobby with blood streaming down the right side of his face.

“It’s Gunther!” Illya cried. Count Beladrac came through the same revolving door.

Beladrac looked quite sporty in dark slacks, a houndstooth jacket, white shirt, ascot and soft Tyrolean hat. The half dozen THRUSH thugs who crowded into the lobby behind him looked less fashionable. The count caught sight of the two agents and Elisabeth.

Napoleon Solo had to give the count credit. Beladrac was quick. It took the man only a split second to comprehend what must have happened. He let out a bellow of outrage that brought all the startled guests in the lobby swinging around toward him.

“Stop those men! They are criminals! Kidnappers! They are kidnapping my fiance!”

No one in the lobby knew otherwise. A couple of bellboys began to run towards Solo and Illya. Solo saw a staircase leading down on to their right. “Let’s go.” He bawled, already running.

Carrying Elisabeth with not too much difficulty, Solo hit the brightly lighted marble stairs leading downward. He bowled a stout, fashionably dressed woman out of the way. She screamed at the sight of the pistols, clutched her bosom and fainted. Above, in the lobby, the shouts of Beladrac and his men in pursuit grew louder.

Solo reached the stair landing, turned and went down the other short flight into a brightly lit arcade of shops. Illya’s bangs flew every which way

as he skidded to a stop beside his friend. He was the first to see the illuminated sign at the arcade's far end.

"That way to the car park, Napoleon."

They ran.

Hatless, Beladrac appeared at the bottom of the stairs. A manicurist popped out of one of the shops and squealed. Beladrac's crew of half a dozen Thrushmen had drawn their guns. So far they hadn't started firing. It would be a different story once they got outside.

Solo was growing conscious of the burden of Elisabeth's weight. Illya reached the little stair beneath the illuminated arrow and dodged through the doorway. Solo followed. Up a short flight of stairs again, and they were outside in the cool twilight.

Lemon-colored clouds drifted near the horizon. The remainder of the sky was darkening as twilight came on. In the east the heavens were full of roiling gray. Thunder muttered.

Their car was parked in the second rack. Solo and Illya pounded toward it. Solo was levering open the rear door with his free hand when a gun crashed.

He ducked instinctively. The window of the door he was trying to open dissolved in a shattering of glass. Bits of it struck Solo in the face. He wrenched to one side, almost fell under the weight of Elisabeth's limp body. Egged on by Beladrac shouting orders in Italian, the THRUSH agents began to fan out among the parked cars.

Crouching, Illya reached up. He levered the door open far enough for Solo to roll Elisabeth inside. Illya stayed low, went up around the front end of the automobile and around to the other side.

From behind the cover of the hood he fired one, two, three shots at the pursuers. A Thrushman peeking out from behind a huge Lincoln parked a dozen spaces away screamed and slid out face forward on the concrete.

Solo slammed the rear door, reached up and opened the right front. He wiggled up into the seat of the right-hand drive machine, got his keys, turned on the ignition as Illya slid in the other side.

A man was running toward them down the parking aisle. Solo recognized one of the local U.N.C.L.E. agents assigned to help them cover the Hotel Penti. Illya shouted, waved his arms frantically. The agent didn't see or hear. A THRUSH killer picked the running agent off with a single shot. The man fell in a welter of blood.

Under the hood the engine roared. Solo rammed the shift into drive and lurched the car out of the slot. A bullet whanged off the hood. Another shattered the rear window, sprayed more glass against their necks. From the floor of the tonneau Elisabeth moaned feebly.

“Where the devil are we going?” Illya demanded.

“Got to lose them,” Solo replied, driving as fast as he dared in the lot.

“Impossible,” Illya said. “It’s nearly the rush hour. Traffic in Rome at this time is–”

“Maybe it’ll help us.”

Solo barely touched the brakes as he reached the parking lot entrance. He swung left into the street between two speeding automobiles. The driver of one howled with rage and shook his fist as Solo’s left fender caressed the smaller vehicle.

Solo was unfamiliar with the streets of Rome. The twilight made vision difficult. All around him, little cars raced at top speed, headlights and taillights dazzling. Thunder rumbled. Lights had come on in the offices and shops. Ahead, the tide of wild traffic in which Solo suddenly found himself bore to the right, around a traffic circle.

Illya looked out through the broken back window. “I’m sure the count is back there in the Rolls.”

Whipping the wheel right, Solo followed the tide of cars around through the traffic circle. The drivers around him manipulated their vehicles as though they were on a race course. Blaring horns and shouted oaths filled the air. The sky was changing from pale lemon to a sinister amber as the storm advanced rapidly toward Rome’s hills. The end of the traffic circle was just ahead.

Solo maneuvered to stay in his lane, shot out of the circle and down a wide boulevard where the going was a little easier.

Traffic was still fast here, but it moved in orderly lanes split by a central grass-planted divider. On the right and left were shops. Abruptly the shops on the right vanished, replaced by the wider vista of a giant apartment-building complex in the early stages of construction.

Half a dozen vast superstructures of steel, fifteen stories high, reared up against the darkening sky. All around the site, bulldozers and other heavy construction equipment stood at odd angles on the slopes of rubble-heaps. Rain began to patter on the windshield. “I see the Rolls, Napoleon. It’s coming up fast behind us.”

Solo fumbled in his pocket, drew out his communicator, passed it to Illya. “See whether you can get anyone at the hotel on Channel B. Tell them we need reinforcements.”

Illya nodded, began adjusting the calibrations. Solo alternated between watching the traffic around him and the road behind via the rear mirror. He thought he could pick out the gleaming Rolls now. It veered wildly in and out among the other cars in an effort to catch them.

The Rolls was about four cars behind. Suddenly the roof section folded back. A man’s head and torso appeared. The man was apparently standing on the rear seat. He brought up a long, cylindrical device with a stock which fitted to his shoulder. The Rolls stopped veering, moved ahead on a straight course.

Solo saw a break on his right, whipped ahead of a van into the curb lane. “Hurry up,” he warned Illya. “They’ve got a launcher back there–”

The *whu-chuff* was followed by a thunderous explosion that rocked the rear of the car.

Solo swore as the back tires blew like giant firecrackers.

Smoke billowed into the car through the shattered rear window. The small projectile fired straight ahead and down from the speeding Rolls, had disabled their car completely. Illya’s call to the U.N.C.L.E. agents at the hotel was drowned out in the clang and whine of metal as the car smashed against the right-hand curb, banged over it, shot out of control across the mercifully empty sidewalk and plowed toward the side of one of the rubble heaps at the edge of the construction project.

“Hang on for–” was all the warning Solo had time to shout.

The car smashed into the side of the rubble pile and rode half way up, stopped. Illya dropped the communicator, hit the door handle on his side. Solo did the same on his. He hauled open the tonneau door, pulled Elisabeth out and sprinted to the top of the rubble heap.

Illya was a flickering shadow beside him. Rain hit Solo in the face as he tossed Elisabeth down the other side of the hill of dirt and gravel and dove after her.

Their wrecked car exploded with a roar of gasoline and a geyser of light and smoke.

Two

Tumbling down the rubble heap, Solo knew the intervening hill had saved them. He felt the intense heat, smelled the smoke, heard the

cacophony of horns and brakes and fenders banging together on the boulevard beyond the explosion. Elisabeth lay crumpled at the bottom of the little hill.

Solo staggered to his feet. He felt dizzy. Illya was picking himself up. The sky had lowered completely. The rain began in earnest. Solo searched the surrounding area visually. The apartment construction project was at least four blocks long on each side. The heavy pieces of earth-moving equipment stood out like strange metal animals against the distant lights of buildings. On the other side of the rubble flames crackled.

There was a confusion of sound from the boulevard as more care piled up. Then, above all the other noise, Illya and Solo quite distinctly heard louder voices, the loudest being the count's: "Half of you search the wreckage. The rest come with me. I think they got out. They must be somewhere among these unfinished apartments–"

"Which is where we'd better be," Solo panted, picking up Elisabeth again and staggering forward.

Their only hope now was to cross the project to its far side and find sanctuary among the shops along the brightly lighted street there. As he ran Solo realized that he'd lost his pistol. Probably in the car. He was gratified to see that Illya still had his gun clutched in his hand. They reached the first of the steel superstructures. Great raw red uprights set in concrete thrust up out of the earth. Solo and Illya dodged into this square forest. The rain beat down steadily. Behind them, men clattered over gravel.

The two agents had nearly reached the far side of the first open building when a beam of light lanced out of the rain behind them, swept over them, past them, then jerked back.

"There, *there!"* Count Beladrac screamed.

Guns crashed. Three, four, half a dozen shots. The bullets spanged and rang from the steel as the agents raced out of the skeleton of the first building and up another hill of rubble. Illya turned to fire, able to see the pursuers only as moving shadows flitting behind them, uncertain targets in the rain and the gloom and the jumble of angular shapes.

Illya's gun exploded twice. A Thrushman cried out and rolled noisily in gravel. Beladrac continued to shout orders mingled with obscenities as he urged his men forward.

"Not much ammunition left," Illya breathed as they ran again. "Two or three shots."

“Save them,” Solo rapped back. “We may need them.”

The strange, grim chase continued, the U.N.C.L.E. agents plunging ahead toward the superstructure of the next unfinished building, a towering cage of girders and beams through which the rain slashed more and more heavily each second.

The mud intermixed with gravel underfoot was turning to soup. Solo sloshed along, conscious of the increasing weight of Elisabeth’s body on his shoulder. Another shot rang out behind. The bullet plowed off the drum of a cement mixer at the near edge of the unfinished building.

Illya whipped around to see whether he could get a clear target. In that moment, the figures of their pursuers–now down to three men, one of them surely Beladrac–appeared at the top of the rubble heap they’d just crossed. A fusillade of shots rang out from that direction.

Solo ducked instinctively. So did Illya, but not in time. He let out a short, surprised cry and tumbled backwards against the nearest steel upright.

As he fell, his trigger finger jerked out of control. Illya’s pistol emptied itself in the ground before he pitched over onto his side.

Now fear rose inside Solo like an evil cloud. He carried Elisabeth back inside the tangle of steel uprights hat formed the base of this particular building, laid her down unceremoniously among a litter of lumber, the wreckage of the concrete forms used when the construction crews poured the ground sockets for the uprights. Then he ran back again to Illya. He knelt, thrust back Illya’s coat. He felt gingerly at the blackish-wet place on Illya’s left side where the bullet hit.

The lower ribs. Whether it was a fatal wound at the moment was impossible to tell. Solo knew it would probably be fatal if he couldn’t get Illya out of here. His friend was unconscious, face a bloodless white blur. The rain beat mercilessly on Solo’s head.

Knowing he was taking a chance, Solo pocketed Illya’s pistol. He lifted his friend and carried him carefully back to where he laid Elisabeth among the broken boards. He could hear the pursuers coming, rattling gravel with their feet. The rain hissed. The lights of the shops toward which they’d been running seemed to gleam at the far side of the universe.

With hands that were beginning to tremble a little, Napoleon Solo took Illya’s pistol from his pocket and examined it. Coldness ate upward from his belly. Illya had discharged all the shots. The gun was empty.

He couldn’t begin to carry both of them, not and go fast enough. Beladrac and his friends were working their way toward him more quietly now, as if they sensed a kill was imminent.

From the darkness someone laughed above the rain. “They are no longer running. We have them, I think.”

That was Count Beladrac, all right. Solo laid Illya’s pistol aside. He tried to separate the shapes of his pursuers from the surrounding darkness. He couldn’t do it. The only light at all in the rubble-strewn construction project was a distant gleam from back on the boulevard where the crash had occurred. There, the glare of streetlamps had turned a murky red in the rain as the fire continued to burn in the wrecked car.

For a moment Solo thought he heard whooping sirens. The Rome police rushing to the scene of the accident? He couldn’t be sure.

Carefully he backed up a step, two. He crouched down among the splintered pile of lumber, feeling over the ground for something he might use as weapon. His knee dislodged one board stacked on top of several others. It fell over with a loud whack. Out in the rainy darkness, a man exclaimed, a low, guttural sound of pleasure. A gun banged.

Solo ducked instinctively. The bullet smacked into a board inches from where he crouched. A splinter broken loose by the shot pierced his cheek like a miniature arrow.

“No firing, please,” called Count Beladrac from out in the shadows. “I much prefer that we take him with our own hands now. Kill him that way also.”

The count’s voice fairly dripped with sadism. A click-rattle disturbed the hiss of rain. Solo knew the three men were moving forward again, closing in.

The sound of sirens on the boulevard intensified. He knew the police were arriving. But they would do him little good now.

Because of the angle at which he crouched, Solo could see nothing of the ground between himself and the top of the last rubble-heap he’d crossed. Somewhere in that intervening blackness, the count and his pair of killers moved, rattling a stone again faintly now. Solo’s cheeks were chilled with the rain. His fingers closed around the length of board. He hefted it like a club, waiting. He was conscious of the faint breathing of Elisabeth and Illya crumpled in back of him.

“I see him, Excellence,” one of the Thrushmen called. “By the board pile–”

“Take him,” Beladrac said.

From the right and left, the Thrushmen closed in. They stood up to run forward, their silhouettes showed against the top of the rubble heap behind them. They loomed like shadow-men, guns clearly defined in their hands.

Well, thought Napoleon Solo, *I never thought it would be here in Rome that I’d finally wind it all up. But you never know.*

A kind of trance fell over him, a cold, emotionless determination instilled into him from the very first day of U.N.C.L.E. training. He’d destroy them if he could. He wouldn’t sell his own life cheaply.

The two Thrushmen running at him had already passed the first upthrusting girders at the end of the building. Solo came up from behind the lumber pile, swinging the board like a ball-bat.

He connected with the head of the Thrushman angling in from his left. The man’s ear pulped. He screamed, going down. By that time the Thrushman from the right was on him, tearing at his throat, battering at his head.

The Thrushman used his pistol as a miniature club, much more effective than Solo’s piece of lumber at close range. *Thud.* Solo took one blow in the center of his forehead. He saw star-patterns, dazzling lights.

He stuck his left foot behind him to step away from the questing hands of the THRUSH killer. His heel slid in a patch of mud. Flailing, he tumbled over on his side. The piece of lumber dropped out of his hands.

“Got him!” the Thrushman chortled. He pulled back his foot, brought it streaking in at Solo’s head.

Solo caught the shoe, gave it practically a one hundred and eighty-degree wrench. The Thrushman clawed air and sat down heavily in the mud. Solo dove forward with his right fist out. He blasted the Thrushman in the jaw. The man snapped over backwards. Taking no chances, Solo hammered his head a couple of more times.

“Ah,” said a voice quite close, “we should not have used our hands after all, eh, Solo?”

The count loomed against the distant light behind the rubble-heaps. More red glares had been added back there–the flickering redness of police cruisers revolving in great sweeping arcs. Beladrac’s gun barrel shone in the rain.

“I wanted to pull you apart piecemeal and make you suffer. You have ruined the effectiveness of my mission for THRUSH. Now, I suppose, I shall simply have to shoot you and be done. I believe the police have arrived back there. It is more important that I escape, survive and try to recoup–”

Beladrac’s voice had grown thick with hate. He was no more than half a dozen feet from Solo now, his immense head clearly limned against the background of lights.

Oddly, Solo didn’t feel fear any longer. Perhaps it was simply too late for that. Perhaps the odds were too hopeless. His hand scrabbled around in back of him. He’d lost the larger piece of lumber. He needed something else, anything, with which to fight–

“Will you stand up for the bullet, Solo?” Beladrac asked him. “Or do you prefer that I shoot you as you are, crouching like a whipped animal?”

Something rough brushed against Solo’s fingertips. He closed his hand around it, felt along it. It was a short length of lumber, snapped or split off a larger board. It had a sharp point at one end.

The rain slashed against his eyes. Beladrac took another step forward. Solo’s eyes had become sufficiently accustomed to the darkness so that certain details of the count’s person were becoming clear. He made out the triangle of white shirt front showing between the sodden lapels of the count’s sports jacket.

“Very well, Solo,” said Count Lugo Beladrac. “I have no more time to waste.”

Up came his gun, centering, steadying.

Solo gripped the bit of wood, unlocked his legs beneath him and straightened them like steel rods, lunging forward.

Beladrac shot. The muzzle of his pistol spread a little orange smear in the dark. Solo drew his right arm high over his head as he charged.

Beladrac’s bullet caught him in the left hip, a crashing, painful force. Solo nearly went down. But the momentum of his charge kept him going. He had one chance, one chance and that was all–

Screaming in alarm as Solo hurtled at him out of the rainy dark, Beladrac tried to shoot again. Napoleon Solo slammed downward with his right hand with all the force left in him. The pointed end of the piece of wood slashed Beladrac’s shirt, drove through skin beneath and buried in the man’s chest.

Solo tore his hand away, felt splinters dig into his own palm as Beladrac threw his head back, dropped the gun, clutched at the piece of wood sticking out of his shirt, tried to pull it free with both hands.

Howling, Beladrac turned. He stumbled up the slope of the nearest rubble-heap. At the crest he faltered, still plucking wildly at the piece of wood. He threw his head back again, his white teeth a dazzle in the distant glare of lights from the boulevard. His ugly face convulsed, became even uglier, an unspeakable mask of hate and pain–

Count Lugo Beladrac fell over on his face, and his weight drove the wood deeper into his body. He lay dead in the rain.

Solo heard scuttling, scurrying. He turned. The two Thrushmen had already fled off through the maze of steel. Solo began calling for the police at the top of his lungs. Presently someone answered him from the direction of the boulevard.

Blood soaked his left trouser leg. He sank down to a sitting position, hung his head, exhausted. The boot-heels of the police drummed closer.

Suddenly Solo lifted his head. An awful smile cracked his lips. He'd just realized how it was that he'd killed Count Beladrac. With a wooden stake in the chest. Fitting, he thought dizzily. Very fitting for a THRUSH vampire–

He pitched over on his side, unconscious in the rain.

THREE

A week later, two men and several pounds of bandages could be found in the luxurious little cocktail bar of the Hotel Penti.

The bandages were on the persons of the two men, Solo and Illya. Considerably refreshed by several days in bed, each had a drink in front of him. Each looked considerably happier with the general state of affairs than he had while the Beladrac business was in progress.

“When are we flying back to America, Napoleon?”

Solo sipped the drink. “As soon as Elisabeth is released from the hospital. I talked Mr. Waverly into a holiday for both of us. I said I’d escort Elisabeth back to the U.S. personally at the end of our vacation.”

“Always the gallant,” said Illya, not without a trace of envy.

“Well, I’ve got to do something to convince her–again–that all men in the world aren’t unprincipled bums and THRUSH agents like the count.”

“Have you seen her today?” Illya asked.

“I was at the hospital an hour ago. That file our doctors dug out of the cabinets behind the wall in Beladrac’s villa was all they needed. The formula for the THRUSH serum was in the file. A combination of anti-hydrobrionic drugs and fresh human plasma are going to make Elisabeth good as new. It’ll take some time, of course.

“But the same treatment can be given to the rest of our people, and eventually all the serum will be gotten out of their systems. Digging out the ones THRUSH already treated is going to take some detective work, but Mr. Waverly feels confident that it can be done. Especially now that we know both the symptoms and how to counter-act them.”

Just at that moment, there was a commotion in the Penti lobby. Out past the glass doors of the lounge, delegates from the Mid-Eastern Peace Conference could be seen breaking up their session for the day. Solo and Illya swung round on their stools to watch.

Men in white bournouses walked and talked amiably with their conventionally dressed opposite numbers from the other country. A few on both sides even smiled.

“We should be thankful,” said Illya, “that Mr. Waverly had duplicates of all of Elisabeth’s evidence and was willing to bring it over himself and

present it."

Solo merely nodded. His eyes were grave as he thought of what might have happened, had not Waverly himself lent his authority to the evidence from the podium, and convinced the delegates that THRUSH was indeed back of the terroristic incidents that had nearly provoked war.

"Where is the old war horse, by the way?" Illya asked.

"I don't know. Still in the hall with some of the delegates, I suppose. He said he'd join us here."

"Elisabeth's travel case with the original evidence ever turn up?" Illya asked.

"No. Beladrac must have destroyed it."

Mr. Alexander Waverly came into sight in the lobby, appearing to hold a conversation with his right hand. He entered the lounge. Waverly had been speaking into his own pocket communicator, which he now replaced in his breast pocket. He dry-washed his hands cheerfully as he moved up to join them.

"Mr. Solo, Mr. Kuryakin–I wish we had time for a small libation together. Unfortunately we don't. Are your bags packed?"

Illya goggled. "Bags? Napoleon said he talked you into a short holiday–"

"Yes, but I just got wind of an urgent matter requiring our immediate presence in New York. I have reservations for us on the two-thirty Air Roma jet to Kennedy International."

"But sir," Solo protested, "Elisabeth is–"

"–coming along nicely," Mr. Waverly concluded. "I saw her myself this morning. I'm afraid, Mr. Solo, that you will have to wait to renew your–ah–friendship."

Solo scowled. "That's how she got tangled up with Beladrac in the first place, because I was so busy I never had time–"

"Tut-tut, Mr. Solo," said Waverly in mild reproof.

"It certainly is a shame, Napoleon," Illya wore a wicked grin. "You won't get to hang round and hold Elisabeth's hand."

"And you're glad," Solo said. "What have you got against romance?"

"Why, nothing," said Illya Kuryakin. "That is, I wouldn't have, if one of the girls ever fell for me. As it is, I call it the proverbial poetic justice."

"I call it unreasonable slavery and servitude," muttered Napoleon Solo.

“I call it working for U.N.C.L.E.,” said Mr. Alexander Waverly, unperturbed. “Shall we go, gentlemen?”